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"FOUND DROWNED"

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IT HAPPENED LIKE THAT
(A Volume of Short Stories)
TRYPHENA
THE TORCH AND OTHER TALES
THE THREE MAIDENS
CHERRY GAMBOL

"FOUND DROWNED"

by

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers), LTD.
PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C.4

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE ANCHOR PRESS, TIPTREE, ESSEX

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"Found Drowned"

CHAPTER I

INTUITION

THE science of criminal theory suffers ceaseless change. After Lombroso's opinions were superseded, the 'mental deficient' hypothesis took their place, and later, for very massive and sufficient reasons, this idea was also abandoned. 'Group testing' proved a substantial advance, for as soon as the general, mental level of a gaol population had been fairly contrasted with the intellectual norm of an equal number from outside, it was found that the average mentality of respectable citizens never exceeded that of their criminal brothers and sisters ; while, in some cases, the prison population proved the better endowed. To-day it would almost inevitably do so.

I had an interesting chat not long since with an old friend—one who was a fellow-schoolboy many years ago. He has done mighty good service for the State, and, as reward, now occupies the post of Governor in one of His Majesty's more important penitentiaries.

"Crime," he said, "is rampant; but evolution does not stand still with any human activity and the nature of great crime grows far more subtle, audacious and distinguished. Better brains are brought to it and the duel becomes one-sided, because, while many highly educated men grow unsocial and turn to criminal careers, those who are set to oppose them continue to be recruited from the old class. Crime, you may say, increases as superstition decreases. A hard saying, but you catch my meaning?"

I did.

"Socialism," he continued, "or the conviction that this world's wealth is wrongly distributed, dulls conscience. Conscience is, in fact, being orientated anew under the pressure of changed social theories. The thief—big or little—does not find himself up against his conscience, but merely up against the laws of the land, which is quite a different proposition.

"In my gaol," proceeded the old soldier, "are from eight to ten hundred men serving long sentences, and a moment's consideration shows the folly of talking about a 'criminal class', which many good idiots still persist in doing. These 'sinners', so to call them, come from every order of society that it is possible to cite. We have members of all the learned professions, including the Church. Soldiers, sailors, lawyers, authors, artists, princes of industry, politicians—all are here. From the House of Commons to the House of Correction is but a step, and many take it. Lawyers are, of course, very much in evidence, for the reason that theft—commonest of all crimes—is easier for that order of professional men than any other. Immensely more criminals go free than we are pleased to imagine. The captured are but a small proportion of those whose superior brain power, nerve, acumen, and long-sightedness enable them to evade the clumsy and mechanical meshes of the law. If you compare the malefactors collected under that roof to the animals assembled within the Zoological Gardens, we might say that, as the numbers there to the free denizens of the wild, so are the criminals here to those still pursuing their unsocial activities in our midst, either single-handed or in groups. Or imagine a seine drifted across a shoal of herring, and compare the catch to the thousands that escape. Then you get an idea of the situation. And the reason, I repeat, is this: human conscience takes a new turn. Fear of future post-mortem punishment has practically vanished, while political theory and the advance of socialism and communism complete the mental change for the masses, which are always naturally anxious to better their depressing conditions. They scorn man-made law, appreciating the fact that it is largely created to protect those who have from those who have not. They regard both law and the existing order as their social enemies, and they bring improving mentality and indomitable energy and ingenuity to fight them."

He chattered on and touched another aspect of his present occupation, laughing as he did so, though the subject was grim enough.

"The penalty of death alone gives salt to this flood of murder and mystery fiction that novel-readers wallow in to-day," he said. "If that were removed; if the shadow of the gallows did not for ever hang over a murderer, half the fascination of this body of literature would be gone. Once let murder mean penal servitude for life—reduced to twenty years or so in the event of exemplary conduct—and the thrall of the subject vanishes. Abandon capital punishment and all this cant about 'students of criminology'—all this lust for reading of wonderful criminals and still more wonderful detectives—will fade out and the British public turn to a more wholesome and fruitful fiction."

Thus discoursed my old friend, and for the benefit of another old friend, I rehearsed his opinions on an occasion when Inspector Newton Forbes, Superintendent of Police at Daleham, was spending an evening in my company as he often did.

We had met in the War, during which I worked at my profession of surgeon, while he held a commission and attained to mention in despatches. Now he had returned to the Police and I had retired from business, living as an idle on-looker at life, and continuing to enjoy the pageant the better viewed from outside.

I am a little, inconspicuous person of forty-five years old, with a high forehead, slate-coloured eyes, commonplace, clean-shorn face and rather high shoulders. I am unmarried; my health is excellent; my relatives are few and unobtrusive. I have tact and a good 'bed-side' manner for a surgeon; but observation rather than activity was always my strong suit, and when an uncle passed, leaving me ten thousand pounds, I abandoned work, purchased a small and seemly house in this as yet unruined fishing hamlet, and devoted my energy to reading, contemplation and organic chemistry, my abiding joy.

As for Forbes, he is a shrewd officer with a practical outlook upon life which I much admire. His opinion of my intelligence is his weak spot, for he entertains an estimate far too flattering, and if we ever differ, it is because he will have it that I should be still turning my life to some purpose and "pulling my weight in the world" as he is pleased to put it.

He has a black, naval beard now-a-days, and his steadfast brown eyes look out unblinking upon life; while if ever a man preaches the vital importance of conduct it is he. For most people he keeps a wise mouth, which is to say a shut mouth; but he owns to many grievances and loves to air them in my company.

To Newton Forbes I was relating my soldier friend's opinions on a rough night in early October, with the sea shouting a bass to my rather high-pitched voice and the wind freshening from the south with rain upon its wings. He had just loaded his pipe a third time and declined a second thimble of pre-war whiskey when we were interrupted. There came a constable in a wet and shining coat, and my housekeeper brought him from the front door to the parlour where we sat.

"Hullo, Moss, what's the matter with you?" asked the inspector, and the policeman, a young fellow of literal bent, made answer as he saluted.

"Nothing the matter with me, sir; but they've found him."

"And who have they found, my lad?"

"The missing banjo man—him that went off to do himself in six weeks ago, sir."

"John Fleming?"

"That's him, sir. I remembered him by his clothes."

The eyes of Forbes met mine and his could not conceal a glimmer of triumph, for we had differed on the subject of poor John Fleming.

In holiday time there would come to Daleham a few itinerant performers, who endeavoured to pick up a living among the summer visitors. Not many patronised the village, but a sand-modeller was wont to arrive, and his melancholy attempts to depict the British Lion appeared to give some people pleasure. Regarded as an allegory it might have entertained the foreigner. Certain young men, broken in the War, also appeared during August and sang as best they could. A Pierrot troupe sometimes tried the pitch, but seldom stayed more than a week, finding the Daleham visitors for the most part elderly and peace-loving folk, who desired no other entertainment than our wonderful coastline furnished. But during the past summer had appeared quite a new comedian. He attired himself comically, painted his face after the manner of a very famous music-hall artist of the past—Chirgwin, 'the White-Eyed Kaffir'—and sang comic songs to his own banjo accompaniment. His sense of humour was not bad and his songs amusing; but he had none of the needful bounce and cheek to prosper as a street entertainer. He was quiet, never coarse, and might have succeeded in the drawing-room. His 'make-up' arrested, but the nature of his songs proved no challenge to holiday folk. He was a tall, thin man, and I had marked him once or twice out of his war paint mooning about on the sands of Daleham, his hands in his pockets and his head down—a somewhat melancholy apparition with failure stamped upon his shabby person and lean face.

Fleming had left his lodgings on an evening at the end of August and informed his landlady—a fisherman's widow—that life was hell and he felt in a mind to end it. Mrs. Friend described him as a gentle and amiable young man, who had come to earn money on the beach and failed to do so. He was in arrears with his rent, and she had told Forbes, that when the musician set forth with this tragic threat, her reply had been that she hoped he would do no such thing until he had paid her little bill. He did not return that night, and on the following morning Mrs. Friend communicated with the police. Newton Forbes was not perturbed, however, and suspected that the young man had cut his losses and bolted, leaving his banjo to pay his account. A perfunctory search produced no evidence of John Fleming's movements; but now, six weeks after his disappearance, a fisherman, caught in rough weather, had grounded his boat at the nearest safe inlet of the rocks, come ashore and returned by the coast-line along an old, disused cliff path which ascended from the beach below. On his way thither, where a high tide had deposited the usual fringe of flotsam in a cave, the long-shore man had found a body, and presently he led a coast-watcher down to it; while, later, men from Daleham set out to recover the corpse, and one among them—the policeman, Moss—identified the dead.

Forbes left me and I heard no more until next morning. He and I had argued the disappearance at the time, and while I thought with him, that the unlucky songster had probably fled, he changed his opinion afterwards and decided, on Mrs. Friend's report of the young man's consistent melancholy and apparent misfortune, that he might well have drowned himself.

Immediate inquiries produced no result and none came forward to claim knowledge of the dead man; but though no doubt existed of his identity and his clothes were sworn to by Mrs. Friend, the work of gulls and crows, or crabs, had effaced his countenance and committed other ravages upon the corpse. One incident, indeed, served to destroy any possible question that might have arisen. The landlady had told Forbes that, as he left her on the evening of his disappearance, she had given John Fleming a letter, which arrived for him while he was out in the afternoon; and this communication, still unopened, was found in the breast pocket of the dead man's jacket. Its significance proved to be immense and it lifted the suicide's departure into a dramatic incident rich in material for the newspapers, giving fair promise also of a bond to link him with his fellow creatures.

Forbes handed the autopsy to a young physician who had lately qualified and set forth on life's adventure at Daleham. Dr. Warner West had taken over his small practice from a retiring man and was known to me slightly, by reason of chance acquaintance at our little reading-room. I did not like him, for he was flamboyant and self-confident—a young fellow with a dogmatic and tiresome manner and a profound belief in his own capabilities; but he had qualified with good degrees and knew his business as well as a beginner without experience could be expected to know it. A doctor's real education only begins after he has qualified.

West was appointed police surgeon of the district—and when Forbes next came to see me, a day before the inquest, he mentioned that the young man had examined the remains and pronounced drowning to be the cause of death. On the same occasion he told me all about the unopened letter and his efforts to trace the writer. Indeed he brought the actual communication for my perusal, though I had already seen it in the morning newspaper.

"It's a letter from a woman addressed to Fleming's home," he explained. "He lived at Ealing—lodging with a Mrs. Wilson—in whose house he occupied a bed-sitting room. He was in debt there, too, and from time to time, while he resided at Daleham, it appears that she wrote to him asking for something on account and begging to know how he was getting on. I have been up to see her myself, and a nicer, or kinder woman doesn't breathe. She was fond of Fleming and felt a motherly sort of interest in him. She says he was alone in the world—a helpless, well-meaning creature, who never had any luck, and who alternated between periods of despair and intervals of sudden hopefulness. She described him accurately and mentioned the slight catch in his speech, which Mrs. Friend, his landlady here, also alluded to. Well, there had come a letter for him and Mrs. Wilson knew the writing. There was a romance in the young man's life and, despite his depressed circumstances, he seems to have been keeping company with an unknown woman. Mrs. Wilson had never seen her, but the man had mentioned a girl on one or two occasions as his only friend on earth, and from time to time he has received letters from her during the last six months. His landlady remembered the writing and was able to tell me that they usually came from abroad. The foreign stamps interested her, for the sake of a little nephew who collected them, and she had asked Fleming for them and he had always given them to her.

"It was a letter in the familiar handwriting which Mrs. Wilson had forwarded under cover of an envelope addressed by herself to Daleham, and it seems clear enough that, noting his landlady's writing and guessing the nature of her missive, but little dreaming what the envelope in reality contained, Fleming did not trouble to open it before taking his life."

Thus ran the missive, rendered pathetic now in the light of subsequent circumstances.

" '*Mignonette,*'
In the Mediterranean Sea.

"*My own dear Johnny,*

It is dreadful to think you can't get this for ages, but the yacht was just leaving Genoa, as the post came *in and we are not touching port again until we come home. To think you love me so much! and I love you more still, and have always loved you from the first moment I saw you. There was something about your dear, beautiful eyes and your gentle voice that seemed magical to me, and when I found you had begun to get interested in me, I felt it almost too wonderful to believe. You say you have nothing to offer me but your love, and I would far, far rather have won that, Johnny, than any prize in the world. Luck must turn soon, and if we can't make it turn single-handed, we'll make it turn together. We will have some wonderful talks when I come back, and of course I'm thinking of real work worthy of you every minute now. I was wondering if Sir Max couldn't find you something. He is fearfully rich, of course, and has estates in Devonshire; and I have suited Lady Max very well and she is exceedingly friendly and considerate and kind. She will hate losing me; but, of course, I can't be a lady's maid any longer now. I shall live only for you soon.*

Oh, my darling Johnny, it is so lovely to think of being your wife and looking after you for ever more and cheering you when you are down and sharing your happiness when things go right. And they soon will go right when we're together.

You don't put any address on your beloved letter—so like you—but I shall send this answer straight to Ealing *the moment I can post it. I might post it at Gibraltar if we stop there ; but Sir Max is keen to get right back and is planning another cruise already, I believe, so I expect there won't be a chance till we're in England. Then I'll post and try for a few days leave.*

Good-bye, my own dear husband-to-be,
Your adoring,
Milly.

P.S.

Address 'at Tor Grange, Clyst, Devon'. We may go there at once, and if still on yacht, letters will be forwarded."

"The irony of fate," said Forbes as I finished. "You see what happened. The man sent his proposal of marriage after her. She's Lady Fordham's lady's maid and has been on Sir Max Fordham's steam yacht, the 'Mignonette', down South. Chance put a wide gap between his letter and hers, and being evidently a pessimistic beggar, he had no doubt assumed the reply was in the negative. Then he dies with her 'yes' in his pocket."

I was examining the envelope of the letter.

"She evidently got no chance to post until back in England," I pointed out, "for this letter was actually posted at Riverton, across the bay. They were within five miles of each other when she posted it !"

"That's so. But she had no idea where he was and despatched her reply to Ealing. The yacht left Riverton before Fleming got the letter, and the family had gone to Clyst, where they still are. I have it in my heart to be mighty sorry for that girl when she read the paper to-day."

"So have I, old man. Did Mrs. Wilson report any visit from this 'Milly' during the weeks that have elapsed since she sent this letter and got no reply?"

"She would have told me had she done so. And she would, no doubt, have given me any further letters that might have come. But there were none. I made a point of asking."

"Doesn't that strike you as very strange?"

The Inspector considered.

"I hadn't thought of it; but, of course, it is strange. She would hardly wait five weeks without making some effort to know where her lover might be."

Forbes left me not long afterwards, and it was during that night, before the inquest, that I suffered from the only real psychical disturbance within my memory. Nothing as a rule interests me less than other people's business. As a surgeon my work had ever been impersonal, and while not, I believe, lacking in a mild measure of interest for humanity

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at large, it never wakened to enthusiasm. My enthusiasm confined itself to natural history and organic chemistry; and during the pursuit of these hobbies I had always found my own company suffice me. Yet now, upon this long autumn night, the circumstance of 'Milly's' pathetic letter and the frankly human interest of the young man's inopportune taking off, persisted in my mind, and I found myself entering upon repeated speculations concerning the incident. Such a deliberate and human challenge brought with it actual surprise, for it was so unlike me. I reproved my curiosity to no purpose. Again and again I turned to sleep, yet found the theatre of my brain fully lighted, the curtain up, and mental speculation alive and alert. I put the recorded facts before me, hoping that reiteration of the obvious would serve to send me to sleep; but subconscious intelligence impatiently rejected the obvious, persisted in challenging my imagination and keeping Fleming's death within the focus of active thought.

I went to sleep at last and woke with a determination to do an extraordinary thing; for I rose, made a more careful toilet than usual and attended the inquest on the banjo-player.

I had an idea that poor 'Milly' might herself appear during the day; but in this suspicion I was mistaken, for the police had already communicated with Sir Max Fordham of Tor Grange, Clyst, East Devon, only to learn that the woman 'Milly'—a Miss Mildred Abbot, Lady Fordham's maid—had been granted leave of absence on the previous day as soon as her ill news reached her. She was to send her direction to her mistress and had not yet done so. The facts did not allay my interest, and an impulse within myself still prompted to sustained mental pre-occupation with the subject. Indeed, before the inquest was ended I had already resolved upon a course of personal action. The Inspector's private assistance would, however, be necessary if I were to depart so far from my usual rôle of looker-on at life, and at the bottom of my mind, even now, there persisted a typical, secret hope that he might refuse to grant it.

"That will both let me out, and clear my conscience," said I to myself in my usual craven fashion.

Nothing happened to delay the coroner's inquiry, and a local jury, having cast uneasy side-glances at the dead and listened to the evidence and summing up, returned a verdict of 'Found Drowned'. Two members of the jury desired to bring in the usual verdict of 'Suicide while in a state of unsound mind', but they yielded to the majority. No stranger appeared to question their decision and no special interest, save that of regret for Miss Abbot's hard case, awoke in any mind.

John Fleming's grave was dug and his funeral fixed for the following day; but before that event I had speech with Newton Forbes, explained my very unusual mental commotion, uttered a conviction that things were not as they appeared to be, and made a rather startling request.

"As you know, I am a hardy rationalist and distrust intuition quite as much as the majority of men fear reason," I began, "but, for once in a way, intuition has me in its grip, my friend. I saw this body when it was quite alone during the inquest, and I tell you, in strict confidence, that Dr. West did no post-mortem. He was satisfied with observation and appearances, as many might have been—myself as likely as not under different circumstances. But I want you to let me conduct a private examination on the dead to-night, old man—not from any desire to discomfort West, or confound the due operations of the law. Far from it: I only wish to set my own, uncomfortable mind at rest. There is nothing illegal, is there, in such a suggestion? I know, of course, that it is unusual, and if you were anybody but a personal pal, I shouldn't make it."

Forbes scratched his little beard and regarded me with his straight stern glance.

"Why do you want to?" he asked.

"For the reason that I do not believe the dead man to be John Fleming."

"Why don't you?"

"Intuition started my doubt; but evidence to back the intuition increases every moment."

"What evidence?"

"The evidence of the dead man himself. In the few moments at my command, I approached him armed with certain knowledge. A professional player of a stringed instrument has his fingers calloused by the operation, and I wanted to see if that strong evidence of identity existed. Unfortunately the hands were too far gone, and to make that test proved impossible. I then studied the feet, which had been protected by shoes, and the clothes upon the body. In my brief examination I discovered two very significant facts: one from the feet and one from the clothes."

"Facts, not possibilities?"

"Facts. His clothes had never been in the sea at all. Had they been immersed and dried afterwards in the cave, their condition would be quite different. The other fact is that the dead man was to my mind unquestionably older than Fleming.

His feet told me that. Fleming might have been any age between eight-and-twenty and, possibly, five-and-thirty. The dead man's left foot had suffered permanent swelling and deformity of two toes—probably from old attacks of hereditary gout. I should say his feet might easily belong to a man of forty-five. That being so, I am naturally interested now to know more about him."

The inspector showed a good deal of humorous annoyance.

"What a beggar you are!" he said. "When I've wanted you to justify your existence and come out of your shell, you always had some futile excuse ready for not doing so; now, when law is satisfied, order restored, and everything goes forward as I could wish, you must wake up and take notice and be a nuisance."

"I'll meet you half way," I told him. "Allow me to satisfy myself that the man was drowned. If he was, we'll let it go at that. If, on the other hand, he wasn't drowned; then—Fleming or not Fleming—I'm sure you'd be the first to wake up and take notice yourself."

"Is it possible in the existing state of the corpse to be sure on that point?" he asked, and I answered that it was.

"Much points to drowning," I admitted, "and one is in no position to assert that Fleming did not suffer from hereditary gout, though he was young to have developed it so badly. But at least we can satisfy ourselves whether Warner West didn't make a very unprofessional mistake."

"You want to score off young West," declared Forbes; but I disdained to reply for he knew that was nonsense.

"Do as you will, but keep it quiet," he said a moment later. Then he gave me the key of the little mortuary, where the dead would lie until the following morning, promised that I should not be disturbed, unless by himself, and left me. It was understood that profound silence should be preserved concerning my operations.

"Then we shan't be given away for a couple of morbid and lawless idiots," grumbled Forbes as he took his leave.

It was a little after midnight when, armed with the tools and utensils my task might demand, I joined the corrupted company of the dead and strove to penetrate such secrets as his body was yet able to reveal.

CHAPTER II

REASON

BEFORE three o'clock next morning I had left the mortuary and returned home, but the occupations of the night were scarcely yet begun for me. I made myself some strong coffee, lighted a pipe and proceeded with my task in my own little laboratory. For much of a nature very unexpected had confronted me. As an expert chemist I work quickly, yet the morning had come before my difficult and complicated analysis was done. I had definitely classified the material suspected after my initial discovery, but to specify it proved beyond my skill.

Newton Forbes arrived while I was in my bath, and I kept the inspector waiting not long. He sat and listened as I consumed my breakfast.

"I take it there is no need to defer the funeral?" he began, and I replied that none existed.

"Bury the man by all means," I told him, "and if I may advise, bury all that I am going to tell you also Conceal it, that is to say, until you consider my subsequent suggestions. In a word, I shall entertain far greater respect for intuition in future, while cordially hoping I may never again be the victim of any such phenomenon."

"Something was wrong in your opinion?"

"As to that I cannot say, though you will no doubt jump to such a conclusion. First, the dead man did not come to his end by drowning. 'Found Drowned' will do for a coroner's jury. It mustn't do for you."

"Then I never trust that bumptious, young fool again," vowed Forbes.

"As to West, if he is to learn the truth, you may confidently trust him in future. Such a sharp experience of his own fallibility will be a lesson that he is not likely to forget. But it remains to be seen if you will tell him that he has failed of his duty—at any rate just for the present. There was not a drop of water in the dead man's lungs. He may have been in the sea, or he may not, but if so, he was dead as a door-nail before he got there. To that I am quite prepared to swear."

"And then, Doctor?"

"Then one naturally had to go deeper. The remains, despite their condition, must have revealed any mortal wound from outside and none such existed; but I proceeded according to rule and finding no such injuries, extracted internal material, destined to throw a light on my natural suspicions and confirm, or dispel them. For the greater part of the night I have been examining the contents of the stomach, and while I cannot tell you the name of the destructive medium, I can affirm its existence. The dead man was poisoned, my lad."

"He may have poisoned himself."

"Certainly he may. Probably a vegetable alkali of some sort is proved, and I may whisper to you that it took a chemist to find it, for the quantity was very small. No doubt it is a poison which can even yet be identified; and, as you say, he may have administered it to himself."

"There is still nothing, then, to prove beyond dispute it wasn't John Fleming?"

"Nothing yet—save what I told you yesterday and my own personal conviction behind it; but there exist means, I think, to satisfy us anon. Personally I am sure as I am alive that it was not he, and feeling profoundly interested in an affair that challenges and confounds my famous inertia, I am going to ask you to keep the matter under your hat for the present; let it be understood the incident is closed and permit me, as a free-lance, to pursue the quest without professional aid, or assistance from anybody."

"A most irregular proceeding and you know it," said Forbes sternly.

"Not so irregular as you are pleased to think. I see you still believe that I am after a mare's nest. You are convinced in your own mind that the dead man was John Fleming, and all you yet know is that he was not drowned but poisoned—a death he may very possibly have preferred. I might, therefore, have merely confirmed the verdict and proceeded on my way without letting you into the secret. I might have started a man-hunt on my own account—and allowed you to hear nothing more about it. But, knowing you so jolly well and feeling you would like to see me justifying my existence with a job of work, I am confident you will smile upon this scheme and let me get on with it. My researches may still confirm your conviction; but if, on the other hand, I find that our vanished banjo-player is still in the land of the living, then—plain dealer that you are—you must be the first to feel me justified in this outburst of energy."

Forbes still displayed a measure of doubt.

"I'm not at all sure that this information should not at once be conveyed to headquarters," he said.

"Why?" I asked. "What does it matter whether Fleming destroyed himself with a vegetable alkali if he is now beyond our reach

"Perhaps not; but it matters a very great deal if he destroyed somebody else with a vegetable alkali."

"Now you are jumping to ridiculous conclusions, and you know it," I replied firmly. "And if you would still withhold the light of your countenance from my ambitions, kindly listen to me a little longer."

I drank my second cup of coffee and proceeded.

"There is something very interesting here, and once concede, for argument's sake, that the dead man was not John Fleming, then you will perceive what a rare flutter in unknown dove-cots will be proceeding to-day."

"Granted for argument, as you say, that it was not John Fleming, we don't want words, we want action," declared Forbes.

"I know. That is what I am offering you. With your permission and as soon as I have digested my breakfast I am going to be devilish active. I foresee an amount of activity that already makes me sigh. But listen to the hypothesis. Fleming in all probability really had reached the end of his tether, and he went out to the honeycombed cliffs, far beyond the usual haunts of men, intending, at any rate when he started, to make a hole in the ocean, or destroy himself in some other way. To the little cave he certainly went, but on his arrival, things happen to confound his plans. John Fleming may be dead himself of course. Events may have occurred to put him at the mercy of other people, who knew more about him than we do, and availed themselves of his arrival to further their own schemes. Or his threat to Mrs. Friend may have been a blind and he went in reality to keep an appointment. But that is far-fetched, and I prefer to suspect that chance offered a very unexpected opportunity to Fleming and he availed himself of it, weakling though he appears to be. If I am right, evidence may exist on the spot, and it is that evidence I am going to seek to-day."

Forbes nodded and showed his perspicacity.

"Your hypothesis being that, on reaching his destination and preparing to end his life, John Fleming is confronted with a fellow man—either alive or dead—and changes places with him—at the man's wish, or on his compulsion, if he was still alive, and at Fleming's personal inspiration if the man were dead."

"Admirably put!" I exclaimed. "My hypothesis in a nutshell."

"Utterly mad," he answered.

"Nothing utterly mad would ever have entered your solid skull," I told him, "but, as I said just now, evidence may exist on the spot to support some such theory. That I have already planned to seek. Meantime—just for the pleasure of the thing—let me show you what a bomb must have been thrown into divers camps by this interesting happening."

"Wouldn't all that do afterwards?"

"It would. But my activities depend upon the tide. There is no need for me to start until ten o'clock when the ebb begins."

"Go on then."

"One smells murder," I began calmly, "because the idea of a man going out to commit suicide and finding somebody else who has selected his chosen cave for the same purpose, is too exaggerated and unnatural."

"Who would have thought you were such a ghoul?"

"Who indeed? However, one smells murder. Now I'm not suggesting that John Fleming has killed anybody, though he may have done so. I prefer to believe that in that seldom visited and very lonely hole he found a dead man—either left there by living ones, or thrown up there by a high tide. I'm going to the hole myself in half-an-hour —to seek for a possible shred of evidence, but not hopefully. Fleming, then, discovers a dead man and assumes that he was drowned. Remember this happened six weeks ago, when the state of the corpse was probably very different. The banjo player finds his defunct fellow man much his own size and perhaps regards the incident as a warning—a direct indication from Providence that his own designs must be abandoned. More likely, however, there is something about this dead body that awakens immense interest rather than fear, or religious awe. Fleming sees tremendous possibilities about the dead. There are no obviously sinister circumstances to make him hasten at once to the police. He is, as he supposes, confronted with a drowned man, and there are facts unknown to us which possibly convince the discoverer that he will greatly improve his own outlook on life if he avails himself of these facts. His nerve is stimulated by the possibility and he takes his chance. He may not, and probably does not, know who the dead man was ; but he affects a change of garments, then departs—to put as wide a space between himself and the district as possible. He has, of course, carefully avoided his old haunts and probably begun a new life under a new name. But consider how, after yesterday, his outlook on existence was changed. Until news of the letter from Milly Abbot, she is ruled out of his life for ever ; but now the newspapers have told him what his landlady's envelope contained and his first step is going to be to let Milly learn as swiftly and secretly as possible that he still lives. Everything doubtless went according to plan otherwise, and he heard of the discovery of his supposed corpse with satisfaction.

"Now he is going to hunt for Milly, while keeping his own existence a secret if he can; and I am going to hunt for him. I am also, of course, going to hunt for the dead man, on the assumption that he departed from life within a day or two of the time when Fleming found him.

"Concerning him, he was either the victim of accident, foul play, or self-destruction. People don't often drink deadly poison by accident and I am within the ambit of my intuition still when I assert that he never killed himself. Therefore it follows that he was murdered and flung into the sea after death, or hidden in the lonely spot where Fleming discovered him.

"Now for my great point. What do the murderers know? Nothing while you and I keep our mouths shut. Not for a moment can they associate this incident with their affair. All they will have read was that a suicide has been identified and buried. But let a syllable of the truth escape and they will be awake and alert instantly. As I see it, therefore, we have the enormous advantage—so seldom vouchsafed to law and order—of discovering a crime before the criminals dream that it is discovered. With such a start you can see how our hands are strengthened. First we learn who it was that perished, then, step by step, we discover those responsible for his destruction; we stalk them; we prove our case and, like a bolt from the blue, make our spring upon them at a time when even the sense of danger has grown dull and they regard their security as assured."

I stopped to give Newton Forbes an opportunity for applause; but he did not applaud.

"All very pretty," he said, "and all probably moonshine."

"At any rate we can see what the day brings forth," I answered. "The tide is now running out and I propose to go unaccompanied to the coast, reach the cave and subject it to a determined search. Should I find a trifling phial, or even the remains of one, there may exist about it a chance that it contained the poison. Which would mean the dead man probably took it himself and points to the increased likelihood of what I don't believe, namely, suicide. More probably no such thing exists; but other items of interest may still be there, for naturally no real detective search of the place was made, since no need for any such thing appeared to exist. That done, I design further inquiries along a line you will readily guess."

I fetched my local map—an inch to the mile—and opened it. Then I rang for my boots.

Forbes, of course, perceived the drift of these actions.

"Assuming that you are within a thousand miles of reality," he said, " the idea would be that John Fleming, in a dead man's clothes, beat it that night for the nearest railway station?"

"Precisely. And what confronts him? The hour is about eight o'clock—possibly later. He probably knows the ropes and makes the cliff path, reaching the summit in half-an-hour, or less. He then heads for Daleham Junction—two miles from our benighted village—hoping to find a train which may be able to get him up to the main line. Study of September time-tables show that his hope was frustrated. The last train for Redchester had departed long ago."

The admirable woman who administered to my needs now brought me coat and boots, and in five minutes Forbes and I had left the house together.

"I will see you this evening," he said.

"You may or may not do so," I replied. "You still fail to grasp that I am on my metal and that nobody on earth can be so energetic as a lazy man, once roused. Should I not be at home to-night, I will leave a message for you and promise never to stray for a moment beyond reach of the arm of the law. Meantime attend the funeral in your official capacity, and if you meet Dr. Warner West, hide your heart—a difficult operation for you at any time."

We parted and I set forth for the coast—bread and cheese and electric torch in my pocket and my favourite ash sapling in my hand.

The morning was fine under a stiff easterly breeze, and our red cliffs, misted with the ineffable blue of Eurus, rolled in their broken peaks and pinnacles round the wide arc of Riverton Bay. Concealed by atmosphere, yet glimmering pearly under its many hills, shone the famous watering-place itself, three miles distant, while immediately ahead a receding tide was laying bare the map of the rocks that extended seaward. Under the brisk wind the sea ebbed reluctantly and a fine flurry of foam and surf flashed and thundered along the beaches. The sun shone; the air had a briny autumnal tang; the very sea-fowl appeared unusually alert and vociferous, flashing hither and thither, laughing and mewing from the cliff faces, or glimmering in little constellations upon the bosom of the waves.

I sighed none the less to see spoliation creeping like a blight over these fair, down-facing scenes. Still lonely stretches of meadow and corn land rolled to the crowns of the cliffs, but round about an irruption of unsightly dwellings with pink roofs spattered every wide space and ruined some of the finest coastal scenery in Devon. Poverty-stricken landowners and fatuous urban councils between them are doubtless responsible for this destruction ; but the root of it : the circumstances which makes life possible in the heart of the country to-day is the motor car. This vehicle has begun to change the face of England, but hardly as yet settled to its dreadful work.

My goal was not unknown to me, for though tourists seldom explored the rough shore for more than a mile or so in either direction, my own first visit had long since resulted in many others. From the little cave, scooped by centuries out of the red sandstone, there extended two parallel arms of sea-weed-covered rock into the sea. At high tide they were submerged, and between them good deep water ran into the mouth of the cavern ; at low tide I had discovered the rocky ledges were a favourite haunt of excellent lobsters. This knowledge I kept to myself, as our Daleham fishermen in my judgment were wont to charge too high a price for this delicacy.

The cave rose but twenty feet above its sandy floor, yet it was deep and ran back so far that to explore the interior thoroughly artificial light was needful, except at early morning, when the rising sun penetrated it. The high tide ran a dozen yards within the mouth, and unusually high tides might have reached to the rear. The place indicated for the moment a very uncommon disturbance of its sandy bottom above high water mark, for not a few local people had lately scrambled over the beaches or arrived by boat—prompted by curiosity to do so. The usual bank of rubbish deposited by the last tide spread across the floor, and I found there empty match-boxes, skates' eggs, varieties of weed, a sand shoe, gulls' feathers and fragments of wood thrown by carpenters from sea-going ships. Also a dead guillemot slain by oil. My task promised to occupy a considerable time if thoroughly pursued, and I set about it immediately on arrival. The actual spot whence the body had been lifted was reported to be just below tide mark, but no sign of that remained. With enthusiasm I began the hunt and with patience and resolution completed it; but not merely did no phial of any sort or size reward me: not so much as a splinter of glass—save a few frosted fragments that might have beaten on the shingles for half a century—repaid my search.

Neither did any object of the least interest appear.

I smoked a pipe, ate my lunch and addressed myself to the second portion of the day's programme. I had already found it an aid to mental activity when assuming the mind and body of the man, John Fleming; and now I pictured myself as clad completely in the garments of the unknown dead and concerned to depart from the scene of my rape as swiftly as possible. Not guessing the nature of the actions before him, Fleming would be ignorant of time-tables and entertain a hope of catching some train from Daleham Junction, thence reach Redchester and possibly make the midnight mail to London. He would be baffled in this hope; but it might well happen that he might inquire at the station, and if by good chance I could prove such an incident, the existence of the banjo-player was practically assured.

To ascend from the cave to the cliff top—six hundred feet above it—proved no mean task, and I wasted ten minutes before discovering the narrow path which made the climb possible. Few ever passed that way and the track was encumbered with thorn and brier, while here and there watercourses had washed a gap. Above, the cliffs towered to their tonsures of black-thorn and scrub, brushed sharply from their brows and bent backward and dwarfed by the force of the prevailing winds. Exhausted with an effort so unusual I reached the summit in half an hour, rested five minutes and then set off over the downs for Daleham Junction, distant some two miles and a half as the crow flies.

The little station was somnolent and those I questioned showed no intelligence; but with time and patience I reached to the man in charge on the night in question—a porter of some understanding, who perceived the drift of my questions. He had nothing to occupy him for the moment, accepted a pipe of tobacco and gave heed to my inquiry.

"The point is to know if any traveller turned up here, between half-past-eight and half-past-nine, hoping to find a train which would run him up to Redchester," I explained. "It is a long time ago, but an event so unusual might possibly have not vanished from your memory, which I can see is a good one."

Thus challenged the man pondered awhile and endeavoured to re-capture the past.

"Not so unusual, because they do turn up late pretty often in the holiday season," he said, "and cuss the line when they find nothing doing."

"The date, to be exact, was August the twenty-seventh," I told him.

"As to the date, I couldn't swear," he said, "but by chance I can mind a belated man sometime round the end of the month. For particular reasons I can call him home. Yes—there was such a man. Let me turn it over, master."

Secretly elated I begged that he would take his time; but the incident came swiftly to his recollection and my first solid step was made.

"Now I can tell you," he said, after half a minute's silence. "It was like this. A chap turned up as near nine o'clock as no matter. The station was shut, but he was tall and made no business of getting over the fence. He was a yachting gent and very civil-spoken and mighty worried that he couldn't get on. I'd just hitched the Daleham fish truck on to a luggage train bound up the line in ten minutes, and I was talking to the fireman of the engine, who happened to be my cousin. And the guard of the luggage-train come up just as I was telling the gentleman there weren't nothing doing till to-morrow by the five-twenty A.M. And then he had a brain-wave—the gentleman. 'Where's this luggage train going, master?' he asked the guard, for, despite his worry, he was very civil-spoken and pleasant."

"Can you describe him?"

"Too dark to say much, but I mind he was a yachtsman, such as you see about a good bit you know. Blue serge and brown shoes—showy he was, with red socks and a red silk handkerchief. And one of they white hats with a peak and a flag in front."

"An excellent description. What of his voice?"

"He spoke quick and in a nervous fashion. And he had just a shade of a kick in his speech that caught him off and on, but didn't stop him you understand. 'Twas like a horse going over a gate—just a balk and off again."

"Admirable! I know exactly what you mean. And as to the gentleman's brain-wave?"

"The brain-wave, so to say, concerned the luggage train. When he heard it was going to Redchester, he was very pleased about it, and when he knew it would be there in time for the London mail, he was still more pleased. But Ben Mitchell —he was the guard—Ben, being a rare stickler for everything right and in order, took a lot of persuasion. Ben's got a mind that hates being shook out of its routine, if you understand me, and the idea of a member of the public travelling in a luggage train fretted him a good deal. But me and my cousin, being of a larger pattern of thought, if I may say so, pointed out forcible to Ben that, after all, the railway was invented for the common good, and I ventured to say there weren’t any rules or regulations against helping a member of the public to travel fifteen mile if he was prepared to pay for his ticket. And the gentleman bluffed a bit then, for we was nearly on time by now. He gave me a ‘Bradbury’ for ten bob to get him a first class ticket and keep the change, and he gave Ben Mitchell a ‘Bradbury’ for twenty bob and felt sure he’d let him run up in the guard’s van along with him, because it was a case of sickness and his mother was took ill and twelve hours hence it might be too late.”

“And the guard was sporting and let him go ?”

“Yes, he did. Ben let him travel ; and I’ll say this for Ben. It was the man’s dying mother turned the trick. Ben wouldn’t have departed from what he thought was his duty for a ‘Bradbury’—not if he’d been fixed in the assurance it was his duty ; but a dying mother was too much for Ben Mitchell, of course.”

“So he went in the luggage train ?”

“He went, and Ben saw him book to London, took his Daleham Junction ticket at Redchester and reported the incident in all its bearings to headquarters. And he told me next day that, rather to his surprise, they made light of it and assured Ben there weren’t no serious shock to the G.W. Railway,

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but he mustn't make a practice of such things. That was their fun, of course."

"There's nothing more you can tell me about the yachtsman?"

"Not a thing. I can't call home no more about him if you paid me to, sir."

"I'll pay you for what you did call home, then," I replied, and applauding the man's lucid statement, rewarded him and went my way.

"A dead yachtsman," I kept saying to myself. Puzzle No. 1: to find a dead yachtsman, who disappeared from his natural environment six weeks ago."

But the more immediate problem was John Fleming, and by the time that I had returned home, exceedingly weary after so much unusual exercise, I began to estimate the size of such a search. Indeed, only one bright certainty put life into me at this juncture. It is easier to find two people than one, and I now felt tolerably assured that Mildred Abbot and her lover would have re-discovered each other.

Forbes did not appear this evening and I was glad of it, for I desired to be alone and plan the attack. Granted that the vanished pair should already be together, since Fleming would know where to communicate with Miss Abbot, the initial problem was which to seek. To find a man who had arrived in London, or at any rate started for London, six weeks ago clad in yachting costume and offering no other clue, appeared at first sight hopeless. There was only one source through which I might glean any information concerning him: his landlady at Ealing; but since she had heard nothing of him since his disappearance, it was little likely that she could help me, save with intimate particulars of his habits, customs and possible friends. I considered that Mildred Abbot was slightly the easier proposition and carefully read again her letter accepting Fleming's offer of marriage. She spoke warmly of her employers and was evidently happy in her position of maid to Sir Max Fordham's wife. From Lady Fordham I might learn something concerning the girl, for if she had been a kindly and sympathetic mistress, it was probable that Milly had confided a measure of her affairs to her and mentioned her engagement. It might be possible also in that quarter to find fellow-servants who knew more about her than any employer was likely to do.

As to the dead man, I dismissed him from my mind for the present. Failing discovery of the young couple, I could concentrate upon him, but to find John Fleming was likely to prove the easier task; and, once found, his information might serve to solve the larger problem, unless he chose deliberately and criminally to withhold it. Then my enterprise must be handed over to the police—an alternative I little cared to entertain.

My mind was made up and on the following morning I took train for Redchester and presently motored out to Clyst and Tor Grange, the ancient seat of the Fordham family.

CHAPTER III

AT TOR GRANGE

A LONE hand is an impossible thing to play on this many-peopled earth, and when I hear of a 'self-made' man, I laugh, because a man can no more create his career unaided than he can create his boots, or his body, or his measure of intelligence. The game of life is no form of patience, which depends upon our personal skill alone, and though there are good players and bad, their results depend invariably upon partners and opponents, for no performer can honestly claim to be the architect of his own fortunes, as so many are proud to do. Failure is invariably attributed to our neighbours; success our human weakness is prone to believe of our own creation.

I was forced to this conclusion as I drove up the wide elm avenue which linked Tor Grange with the public road. I had planned to carry out my enterprise single-handed and display an intellect even more acute than Inspector Forbes pretended for me; but here, at the outset of the adventure, I was humbly approaching other people and in truth feeling some doubt as to how they might view my incursion. A difficulty existed at the outset, for I brought no credentials to the attack, and while the police need neither introduction nor explanation in pursuit of their proper vocations, I perceived that both might be demanded from me.

An excuse of a humanitarian nature was ready, and here again I made an interesting discovery. Often to Forbes I had declared a detestation of police methods, which demanded deliberate lying from officials, the better to gain their end ; but now I myself had hatched a falsehood as a present help in time of trouble, and observed how, despite high resolutions to be original, my mind was already slinking along the ruts sanctioned by experience and necessity in criminal inquiry. To the last I trusted it might not be imperative to lie, but in five minutes the need became pressing and, with mingled shame and pride, I perceived that this art—so difficult to the nobler order of mankind—offered no obstacle whatever to me.

A butler of conventional pattern accepted my card, listened to my desire for a brief interview with Lady Fordham and departed, leaving me in a spacious hall remarkable for its peculiar decoration. The inevitable antlers, or copies of classic statuary, the old armour, tattered pennons and other indications of a raptorial past were not here; but their places had been taken by large models of ships and pictures of maritime scenes and interests. Huge canvases of cutters and schooners under racing rig hung upon the walls among uplifted glass cases, in which every sort of sea bird known to science stood stuffed, staring down glassy-eyed upon the beholder. The place was dedicated to the sea—as approached by wealthy people with boundless admiration for their subject. I felt that the butler should have worn navy kit and the immense 'grandfather' clock yielded place to a ship's bell. Indeed, more than one nautical bell adorned the collection and two figureheads of considerable size, painted dead white, were lashed between the pillars of the hall.

To catch a measure of marine enthusiasm was easy in one who loved the sea as well as myself, and this curious display put me into good spirits before the land-lubber of a butler returned and bade me follow him. He conducted me into no woman's boudoir, but evidently a man's study, in which the aura of the hall appeared echoed and intensified.

But for the height of the ceiling, which was rich in old Italian plaster-work from Tudor times, the room more nearly resembled a big ship's saloon than an ordinary dwelling chamber ashore. It was lighted by a deep bow window and its walls were hung with photographs and oil paintings of yachts. Upon a console table shone a brilliant array of massive but tasteless silver cups and other trophies. The place was littered, for a confusion of kit-bags, cabin trunks, and other luggage had here been assembled, and it needed no observant eye to mark that people were about to leave Tor Grange.

A man suddenly entered and I guessed him to be Sir Max Fordham. He might have been forty years old and was well built and sturdy, with a solidity of trunk and a breadth of shoulder which argued character. But his face belied it. He had sailor stamped upon him and his genial countenance and tanned skin spoke of the sea ; but his blue eyes were gentle and his big, kindly mouth, a little weak. He was clean-shaven and inclined to stoutness, for though his chin was small, it promised soon to double. He wore a blue serge suit, soft shirt and yachtsman's cap, and evidently even when ashore preferred the easy rig of the sea to the usual costume of a country gentleman at home.

He came from a side door shouting for somebody called 'Thorne' and was clearly surprised to find a visitor.

"Sorry !" he said. "Excuse my noise. Didn't know anybody was here. What can I do for you ?"

There was an easy and breezy charm about the man as he strode forward and shook hands, then paused and looked at me inquiringly.

"The apologies are due to you," I answered. "But your butler put me in here. Lady Fordham has been good enough to see me about a little matter."

He started and to my surprise showed strong feeling. From friendly indifference he grew alert and scanned me narrowly. His mood changed and he frowned.

"Who are you ?" he asked shortly, "and what do you want with her ?"

The necessity to prevaricate had arisen sooner than I expected.

"I am Doctor Meredith of Daleham in Riverton Bay, and you doubtless are Sir Max Fordham," I replied. "My purpose concerns the unfortunate man whose dead body was discovered on the coast down there a week ago. You will be as familiar with the particulars as I am, and it was in hope that I might learn something concerning the young woman in Lady Fordham's employment—Mildred Abbot—that I ventured to intrude."

Sir Max instantly returned to good humour on hearing the object of my visit.

"Oh, that !" he said, and assumed an air of gravity, though I could see the event caused him no real concern. "Awfully tragical—most pathetic really. But the girl's gone—went an hour after she'd read the thing in the paper. Went off to a friend. It quite upset my wife—here she is."

Lady Fordham entered at this moment, holding my card in her hand. She was younger than Sir Max by ten years, a pretty and graceful blonde with a face that had been beautiful but for a mouth something too firm and tight-lipped. She had wonderful grey eyes, but was evidently not vain, for her face showed signs of the open air and she disdained the various messes it is customary for women to smear upon their cheeks and lips to-day. She was quick and apprehensive in speech and manner, and I diagnosed character combined with humour, intelligence and a fine nature. 'A lady', I thought, 'who would stand no nonsense, or invite any, but might prove a rare good friend.'

"My wife," said Sir Max, and then turned to her. "This is Doctor Meredith from Daleham, where that poor beggar was found—Milly's young man. He'll tell you what he wants; but I don't think we can help him."

He moved away, then slipped back through the door whence he had come and I heard him shouting for 'Thorne' again.

"Sit down," said the lady. "We're in the usual chaos before sailing. We go to sea again to-morrow. My husband is never very happy ashore and I share his passion for travel. Now what can I do to help you?"

"It is more than kind to see me," I said, "and I am most grateful. There are certain effects of the vanished man and it has occurred to me that this poor girl might like to have them. I also want to know what you can tell me about her and her manner of leaving. Was she a nice girl? And did she give you satisfaction?"

"A very nice girl and I still hope to get her back again. It is a great nuisance losing her at this moment, because she was a splendid sailor and so happy on the sea. I couldn't keep her under the circumstances, but I made her promise to let me know her direction and told her I should be glad to have her back when I returned."

"Can you describe her, Lady Fordham?"

"A dark, attractive, reserved girl, with the charm and neatness of a French maid and the nature of a kindly child. I had her from an acquaintance with whom she worked as a nursemaid at Ealing; but her ambition was to be a lady's maid and, finding she liked the sea, I took her with me on our last trip to the Mediterranean. She was very happy on the

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'Mignonette', and just after we left Genoa she told me of her engagement. By that time I had taken to her and found her invaluable. So I made her promise to come for this voyage to the West Indies before she left me. Then came the crash—yesterday morning."

"She saw the newspapers of course?"

"Yes—everybody did. My husband read out her letter at breakfast—the letter in the dead man's pocket—and I was greatly touched. I went up to her room at once and found her in the extremity of grief."

"She had already decided to leave you?"

"No—she had said nothing about going then. She had been uneasy and troubled for several weeks, because her letter, posted six weeks before and accepting this poor John Fleming, had never been answered. She confided in me and I urged her to try and find him through his Ealing landlady; but she was proud and showed some spirit and a little unreason. The thing got on her nerves naturally; but she had determined to do nothing until she returned from the West Indies in a couple of months. She described Fleming as a nervous, highly-strung man, and it occurred to me that the delay might have caused him to change his mind about Milly."

"What decided her movements yesterday morning?"

"A telephone message. I talked to her and comforted her to the best of my power; then I left her and half-an-hour later—but I'll call Thorne. He happened to be passing the telephone box off the hall and answered. You shall hear exactly how it was."

She rang the bell and the butler appeared, then went to find Thorne.

"Thorne," she explained, "is my husband's factotum and valet and chief steward on the 'Mignonette.' Sir Max was in the Navy before he succeeded his father here and he served during the War on a mine sweeper, being very familiar with the Channel. There he picked up Thorne, who is an old merchant sailor."

A little man entered the room at this moment and saluted Lady Fordham sailor fashion. He was quite elderly, with a bald head and grizzled whiskers, an ugly, humorous old face, and weather-bitten countenance. The lid was down over his left eye and his yellow teeth were evidently his own.

"Thorne," said his mistress, "please tell Dr. Meredith exactly what happened before Milly left us yesterday morning."

The old sailor touched his forehead and spoke quickly and to the point.

"It was like this, Doctor. Passing through the hall round about ten o'clock I heard the telephone bell and, as there wasn't nobody else in the offing, I picked up the machine and axed who was wanted. A man's voice answered and begged to know if Miss Mildred Abbot was handy and, if not, where might she be found. With that I told him she was handy and bade him hold on while I fetched her. I went in the kitchen and sent a maid for Milly and she come down and took the call."

"One moment, Mr. Thorne. Can you remember the voice that summoned her?"

"It was like any other voice, Doctor. Nought to catch hold of."

"No hesitation—just a direct inquiry for Miss Abbot?"

"I can't call home nothing out of the common."

"Thank you. And then?"

"She went in the box and, of course, nobody knows what she heard except what she told us. I larned from the cook a bit after."

"What did she report?"

"Well, it was a brother of a woman friend of hers as had read the news. And the woman offered Milly to come to her and be comforted. The girl was in a flustered state, of course, but she reckoned it might be a clever thing to do. I told her she'd be throwing her ladyship if she went off like that; but she said her ladyship would well understand; and so she did do, begging her pardon for speaking of her before her face."

"Of course," said Lady Fordham.

"So Abbot packed up instanter, giving out she'd come back to the family later if wanted; and then she had the servants' car and Bob Blake drove her to the railway station."

"But she gave no address?"

"So I understand, Doctor."

"She will certainly write to me. I trust her and value her," declared the lady. "That will be all, Thorne."

The little man withdrew and I rose to go.

"I am more than grateful to you for your great kindness," I said, "and I thank you much."

She shook hands pleasantly and rang the bell.

"Should you find Milly, Dr. Meredith, I know you will be so kind as to let me hear from you and remind her that I expect her to return. We sail immediately, but a letter to the yacht at Barbados would find me as we shall make Georgetown our headquarters, while we cruise down the Southern Islands and then up the Northern ones."

I promised to remember her wish and expressed confidence that there would be no difficulty. The butler saw me to my taxi-cab and I enquired if the man, Bob Blake, had learned anything concerning Miss Abbot's destination.

"We asked him when he came back from the station, sir," he answered, "but he'd left before she booked."

"Would she be known at the station?"

"Very unlikely, sir."

To the station I went, however, and made inquiries as to travellers by Milly's train on the previous morning. The booking clerk was obliging and did his best; but a dozen persons had travelled from Clyst at that time and he could not say whether the ticket in question had been for an up, or down train. In the latter case her destination might have been Redchester, or to stations beyond. There were tickets to Daleham Junction and other stations, and one to Plymouth. Had she gone by the up train she might have booked to Salisbury, or elsewhere. There was one booking for London—third class. My instinct fastened upon this ticket, but further inquiry of porters threw no light upon it. None remembered a young woman travelling up the line with a box for Waterloo, though several had apparently proceeded in the direction of Redchester.

"Which being market-day, they would do," explained a porter.

So my first throw had won no direct rise, though it confirmed my former conviction and showed clearly enough what had occurred. Fleming, having read his sweetheart's letter in the newspaper, no doubt guessed that she would do the same. He had noted her address and rung up Tor Grange on the chance that she might still be there. He had assured her of his life and safety, directed her to say nothing to anybody and bade her come to him instantly. She had obeyed him and probably travelled to London, where he most likely met her, waiting at Waterloo for incoming West country trains until she arrived. To conjecture their future movements was beyond my power and I began to perceive how a private individual, without any machinery at his command, was going to find the forthcoming hunt somewhat arduous.

I considered my next step and pondered the situation. It was safe to assume that John Fleming had changed his name and that Ealing, of all places, was the last in which one could expect to find him; yet to Ealing I went on the evening of this day, put up for the night at a hotel and set forth for No. 7 Windsor Road on the following morning to learn how much it lay in the power of Mrs. Wilson to tell me. Reflection convinced me that only by the path of character might I hope to arrive at John Fleming; and the more I was able to learn of his ways, his interests and his outlook on life, the better my chances would be. For the moment I merely knew that he had probably changed his name and come into possession of a certain amount of money —presumably from the pocket of the dead man. He had been free of cash with the porter and guard at Daleham Junction, and he had booked to London afterwards; but six weeks and more were passed since then and it seemed improbable that the man was still in funds.

Mrs. Janet Wilson proved only too willing to talk. She was a small kindly woman with a mop of shingled grey hair, a round genial face and a ready tongue. She wept copiously on hearing my purpose and declared herself as lost without her lodger.

"A distracting man he was," she said, "but there was something to him—not only his helplessness neither—which always drew me and made me patient. Helpless he was and he went in a dream sometimes. If he'd been run over by a motor car I could well have understood it; but to think he took his life—that cast me down far more than any natural death would have done."

"I understand that well, Mrs. Wilson; but tell me what drew you to him. I can see that you have a big heart, because it looks out of your eyes, and I'm sure any helpless thing would find a friend in you; but what was it about Mr. Fleming that brought him the luck to win your friendship?"

"His nature, sir," she answered. "He was a gentleman to begin with and he had a bigger heart than ever I had—a most well-meaning young man. I could tell you of a hundred kind things he tried to do. He seldom succeeded in anything, because he had the stamp of ill-luck upon him, and them stamped with ill-luck don't cut no ice in this world of course. But he'd try, and he'd trust people, and he'd easy be took in, you know, because he was so full of hope. No more judge of human nature than a street pillar-box to say it kindly. He was like a young man out of a Sunday school story—just good because he couldn't be anything else. Very wishful to get on and blessed with boundless hope, as I say, though easily cast down. He said he was an artist—a thousand times he told me he was an artist, though he never put brush to paper. He sang and played the banjo and sometimes had a good day; and once he got a show at a music hall; and then the world was coming all right and I was going to be richly rewarded and so on; but he was a failure and got hissed. I went and saw him fail and very near cried tears of blood. He came home and talked of suicide—a very favourite subject with him. But them that talk of it, in my experience, are the last that give way to it. I could tell you a tale about that, but it wouldn't interest you, I expect. I didn't fear for Johnny's life, but I feared for his wits, after that fearful failure."

"He was temperate and orderly?"

"Oh, yes—a very steady man. A dreamer you might say and dead sure that he was a very clever musician. I'd ask him to try and find man's work sometimes and give up wandering round with his banjo; but then he'd say he was an artist and that was the only way he could express his individuality. 'Express his individuality' was a very favourite word of his, though what he meant exactly I couldn't tell you. But sometimes I'd get desperate and beg him for the love of Mike to express his individuality by paying a bit off his over-due money. And yet such a properly well-intentioned man he was, that you couldn't quarrel with him for more than a day, or maybe two, at a time."

Being herself a woman brimming with human kindness and sympathy, I discounted in some measure this glowing account of the banjo-player; but it suggested that John Fleming could hardly be responsible for anything very desperate in the way of crime. The type of the morbid and inefficient artist was probably better known to me than Mrs. Wilson.

She accused herself in one particular.

"Perhaps," she said, "I wrote rather too often when he was away and nibbled for a bit on account. But I'm very poor and now and again I grew a trifle desperate; and I thought that, down there by the sea among holiday people he might be making a useful sum. If he'd only known that last letter was bringing him the good news of his young life, he wouldn't have left it in his pocket when he drowned himself, poor fellow."

"Why didn't you just re-direct the letter and save three-halfpence?" I asked.

"God forgive me, I'd got a stamped envelope ready and thought I'd stir him up with my handwriting afore he saw what I'd sent him. So you may say in a manner of speaking that I killed John."

She wept and I delayed out of charity to console her. It was one of those rare cases when bread is cast upon the waters, not to be returned after many days, as in the case of oriental harvests, but within twenty minutes. Had I left the lady before that brief space of time, my first really hopeful clue had for ever been lost; but though she proved of no practical service, Mrs. Wilson's tears and her obvious goodness moved me. I stopped, therefore, uttered amiable platitudes and even went so far as to hint at a possible sequel to the affair.

She took this up rather more quickly than I expected.

"If you mean there's more in it than meets the eye, Doctor, I wouldn't say but what I'm with you," declared the lady, drying her tears. "You may or may not have a feeling come over you that things ain't what they seem sometimes?"

"Very rarely indeed," I replied. "In my experience I have seldom failed to find things only too often exactly what they seem, if not worse. Never better, if one has appraised their significance correctly at the outset; but I have shared the emotion you speak of."

"Just so—just exactly so," she said. "And in the case of John, knowing him better than anybody and knowing the streak of everlasting hope in him, I've felt somehow, unless life had got far worse with him than I could imagine, that it was very queer he'd put himself out."

"And what was the alternative idea in your mind, Mrs. Wilson?" I inquired.

"Not a particular bright idea for Johnny—not so far as this world is concerned," she confessed, "but a thought more hopeful concerning the world to come."

I saw no light here and looked at my watch.

"And what was that hope, if I may ask?"

"Why, suppose the poor chap was done in! Suppose wicked folk took his poor life instead of him taking it himself, Doctor? Then he goes to his heavenly home innocent, and that's a tower of strength. To run 'gate-crashing' into heaven on your own is very bad morals and very bad manners also in my opinion, and I ain't got no sympathy for suicides and never did have; but if God Almighty, for His own hidden purposes, willed for Mr. Fleming to be knocked on the head, then that's the Lord's affair and not Johnny's and he goes afore the throne without a stain on his character."

"A remarkable piece of reasoning, Mrs. Wilson, and I am not going to argue about it. But in that case——"

And now my harvest born of friendly delay came punctually to fruition.

A knock sounded at the door and as I prepared to leave and accompanied the landlady to the entrance, she took a letter from the little wicker cage that held it.

I thanked her for her good offices and prepared to depart; but then I noticed the widow had apparently forgotten my existence for she was staring with evident amazement at the object in her hand. She made no attempt to open it, for the superscription had apparently turned her into stone. Instantly scenting some light on my own problem I stood still, ceased to say 'good-bye' and waited for Mrs. Wilson to recover her equanimity. This she swiftly did, gave a gasp and lifted her eyes from the letter to my face.

"If that don't beat the band !" she said.

"Not bad news I trust ?"

"Who can tell if it's bad or good, Doctor ?"

"The interior might throw light," I suggested. But she had not yet mastered her emotion caused by the exterior.

"The handwriting !" she said, and for a moment I believed that the probably familiar script of John Fleming confronted her.

"A writing that you know ?"

"As well as my own. A dozen letters he had from her—perhaps two dozen."

I perceived her discovery.

"Letters for John Fleming from the lady of his affections ?"

"Her for certain."

"And the letter addressed to him ?"

"It's addressed to me !"

"This may prove most important, Mrs. Wilson. If you are sure that Miss Mildred Abbot wrote that letter, she may have something to tell you."

"What should she have to tell me, poor soul? I never saw her, but Johnny often talked of her and said she understood him."

I looked at the letter and instantly recognised the hand-writing.

"I may tell you," I said, "that the police at Daleham let me see the letter from Miss Abbot found in the dead man's pocket."

"It very near broke my heart when I read it all in cold print, Doctor."

"I'm sure it would, knowing Mr. Fleming so well. The point is that this undoubtedly comes from Miss Abbot, and if you would read it and be kind enough to let me know something concerning the contents, you may rely upon me to take no unfair advantage of the confidence."

"I'm dead sure of that by your tone of voice," she answered. "I trust a lot to the tone of people's voices, Doctor. They tell me more sometimes than the words folk say."

"Very clever of you, Mrs. Wilson. A great gift."

"Come back in the sitting-room," she said, "and I'll look inside."

"And please read it carefully," I begged. "It may be private and confidential, in which case I have no wish to hear anything about it."

This was less quixotic than it sounded, because I had clearly read the postmark upon the letter; but beyond that I desired to inspire every confidence in Mrs. Wilson, so that the address from which Milly had written might be gleaned without delay. If you impress upon any individual your strong desire to know nothing concerning this or that matter, human nature is such that an equally strong desire to make you know something is often awakened.

"Registered you'll notice," said Mrs. Wilson, who apparently found herself powerless to break the envelope.

"Certainly registered, so you have the right to assume it is important."

She slowly tore it open and I turned my back upon her and looked out of the window. The house faced north and beside the gate stood a naked laburnum tree, while on the gate-post sat a large cat of the colour of marmalade, washing its face and regarding with indifference the passers-by."

At an exclamation of surprise I turned to find utmost bewilderment on the face of Mrs. Wilson. In her hand she held paper money and this she dropped upon a table at her side, then peered again into the envelope.

But nothing further rewarded her search.

"Cash !" she said. "A dollop of Bradburys !"

She counted the money while I re-examined the fallen envelope.

"Eight, ten," murmured Mrs. Wilson. "Eight pounds, ten shillings of the best, Doctor."

She handed the money to me and I checked her calculation, observed the notes were all quite new and handed them back to her.

"Does this gift convey any idea to you ?" I asked. "Do you associate the sum of eight pounds, ten shillings with Mr. Fleming ?"

She reflected a moment, dropped the money and began to weep again.

"Yes it do—oh yes—very much so—money from the dead you may say."

"He owed you that, perhaps ?"

"He owed me three, eight, six. That's the three, ten. And that leaves five. But the five is nought but his pride—or it would be her pride now he's gone. Last winter, knowing he hadn't got a out-door coat to his back, I bought him a second-hand one ; and a godsend it was and he granted it to be so ; but he always swore he'd be evens with me and counted he owed me five pounds against it. Nothing would shake him there and now—now—oh, Johnny!"

She was much moved and I waited for her to recover.

"Of course there ain't no miracles now-a-days," she murmured, "and dead men and women can't send you Bradburys, even if they was minded to. If they could, I'd be a rich woman, for many have gone home that set high store on me, God bless them. But this—I see how it was, Doctor. It didn't want no letter, though I wish she'd wrote one, so as I could thank her and tell her how well I loved the man. And if she's hard up, I'd find out and send the money back."

"It's all clear to you, Mrs. Wilson?"

"Oh yes—so clear I could cry my eyes out, I'm sure. He hadn't no secrets from her—Johnny hadn't—and no doubt she knew what he owed me; and now she's heard the fatal news, for his honour and good name, she sends me every stiver. But the five pounds she shall have again if I can find her; and she shall put it into his grave-stone."

"A very affecting and proper action on her part," I declared. "She must be a nice young woman."

"Johnny would never have fallen for her if she wasn't. How would you set about tracking of her down, Doctor?"

"The postmark on the letter is Plymouth. That's all she tells us. If I may advise, I should wait and do nothing for the present. If she wants you to know about her, she will write to you herself. If she does not, then it is a question whether you would not do best to respect her wishes."

"I'm itching to comfort the poor girl and say things about Johnny to make her happier. It do comfort they bereaved people to praise their dead to 'em."

"I should be glad to find her myself," I assured the good woman, "and this envelope may possibly help me to do so. But a postmark in itself is nothing: she may have sent the letter to a friend to despatch for her. We can at any rate leave it for a time; and meanwhile, do not hesitate to accept every penny of this money in the generous spirit it comes. Be sure that Mr. Fleming would wish this to happen and feel glad to know you had it. Say nothing to anybody else for the present. If I hear a word to interest you, I will write to you; and if you hear more, it will be good of you to let me know."

She promised to do so, wrote down my direction and gained obvious support from my advice to accept the money. She pressed me to have a cup of tea despite the early hour, and declared it an act of Providence that I should have been with her at this critical moment.

We parted the best of friends and I returned to Paddington and caught the next train for the West.

One had now come to a fairly luminous view of John Fleming's character. That he was in funds appeared certain and that he entertained decent ideas and a sense of honour was also manifest.

I abandoned him and pondered at my own good fortune, for while familiar with the fact that clues are vital to successful story-telling I had always felt positive that reality must be for those destitute of these blessed aids; and Forbes never failed to second my belief.

"Real clues," he said, "are very rare, because experienced criminals know their significance and make a fine art of avoiding them. The reason why known murders are often undiscovered, and probably many unknown murders never even suspected, is entirely owing to masterly avoidance of clues, or the provision of false ones."

To-morrow, I told myself, I would go to Plymouth, for though I had warned Mrs. Wilson against the assumption that Miss Abbot must be there, her letter came from there and I felt little doubt that the girl and her lover were united somewhere in the Three Towns.

CHAPTER IV

THE FINDING OF FLEMING

THAT night Newton Forbes listened with some interest to my narrative, but he had few comments upon it. I expected a measure of admiration and applause, which he administered in small doses and unwillingly.

"You were right," he said, "and I was wrong, if that is any satisfaction to you. That John Fleming is alive there can now be no doubt; and once found, the first thing will be to get to the bottom of his relations with the dead. He may be a murderer, or he may not, and the fact that, so far, he sounds to be a mild and amiable sort of creature, doesn't destroy the possibility. Killers can be very sentimental—especially the homicidal maniac."

"Has he sent any money to Mrs. Friend, his landlady here?"

"He has not. He probably knows that his effects will be sold and suffice to pay her. They represent about two pounds, ten shillings."

"I'll buy the banjo," I said. "He may like to have it again."

But the inspector deprecated levity.

"This is all very fine; but we're faced with a police job now, and, as it's highly important that Fleming should be found, I think I must ask you to free my hand, Meredith, and let me get on with it."

"Most emphatically not," I replied. "This is my mystery, not yours, and I feel quite competent to handle the next phase. It was an undertaking and I shall consider any interference not only an unfriendly act, but, what is impossible for you, a breaking of faith. I go to Plymouth immediately, while the scent is hot, and if I fail to find either the man, or woman, in a week, then I may invite your machinery to function. For the rest you must be sporting and straight, old man, and always remember that but for me, you would never have discovered anything out of the common at all."

"Because Warner West failed of his duty, not because I did."

"Just so. In your business one weak link may very likely defeat the ends of justice, just as, in the criminal's business, one weak link may land him on the gallows. We know now that Fleming lives, that he has money and that he is in close touch with

Mildred Abbot. We think he is at Plymouth; and of one important thing we may be absolutely certain: that he has not the very remotest idea his secret has been guessed by anybody on earth. He doubtless regards himself as safe from every possible angle of observation."

"Not he. There's the dead man. People like that don't drop out of life without making some sort of stir."

"His relations with the dead man remain to be investigated. I doubt if he knows as much about the dead man as you, or I, could wish."

"He may lie about him."

"It is quite possible that he will."

Then I gave Forbes some work to do.

"I so far yield as to invite your collaboration in one particular, impressing upon you utmost secrecy in the meantime," I began. "There is, as you say, the dead man, and we have now reached a stage in the inquiry when we may begin to think about him. If, as I firmly believe, he was murdered and flung into the sea afterwards, or taken by night to the cave where they found him, then one may fear his identification will be difficult. Those responsible for the crime would have taken steps against any easy identification in the event of the dead being discovered. He was clad in yachtsman's clothes;

but, if those clothes were his own, they had doubtless been pretty carefully searched for clues."

"Against that, however, it is clear Fleming came by plenty of money that night—and presumably out of the pocket of the corpse."

"That's true; but the money itself might have been a blind. If the dead man was a pauper, then what better trick to conceal his identity than leaving plenty of money in his pocket? If he was a man who had no truck whatever with the sea, how better hide the truth about him than by dressing the body in yachting clothes? The unfortunate beggar may have already been disguised, to deceive after death, before John Fleming subjected him to a second fancy dress."

"That's getting too deep for me," confessed Newton Forbes; "but I can, at any rate, get particulars of everybody reported missing at that date and onwards. For the rest, I'll hope your luck may hold; but don't get vain, because pride goes before a fall. You're trusting a lot to imagination and assuming a great deal too much in my opinion."

I took this humbly.

"One is only an amateur, of course, and even what we always hear described as 'routine work' lies beyond me, for the reason that I have not the command of the forces a professional controls, with which to do it. In detective fiction, and for all I know in real life, a wave of the C.I.D. man's hand and people are put under observation, doubtful characters are dogged day and night, motor cars are held up, the ports are guarded, virtuous heroes and heroines protected and an army of skilled subordinates set in motion. So you need feel under no compulsion to warn me against vain glory, or even danger. It will be time to show vain glory if I bring it off; and should I bring it off, I warn you that I shall have a great deal to say, for success will tend to prove that secrecy is far more vital in your business than you and the profession at large appear to imagine. If I—a tyro, with help from one solitary policeman sworn to keep his mouth shut—if I find out that a murder has been committed and learn the name both of, the murdered man and his assassins—then I say that a tremendous case has been made out for a new method of detective research. We scream to the murderers that their crime is universally known; we howl our clues in every daily rag that battens on human curiosity and wickedness; we indicate the operations of the police at every step; we leave no stone unturned to let the criminal know all that is being done to discover him. And what is the result only too often? If he keeps his nerve, the game is in his hands. He knows that his achievement is only a nine days' wonder and is well aware that, if he can evade discovery for six months, he will be practically safe.

"But in this case the situation is all against the evil-doers and I have a stranger card to play than the combined might of Scotland Yard : profound secrecy. This may, my dear Newton, become a classic case illustrating my own theory : that the first step should always be to create a consciousness of complete success in the criminal mind and thus lull it into that spirit of satisfaction and complacency so often fatal to any enterprise. Once let a man think he is a clever dog and far too sharp for his neighbours, and Nemesis is merely a question of time. He will assuredly learn his mistake and may live to reckon the cost, or even find his life is the cost."

"That's just what you're doing now," said the inspector, pouring himself his usual mean tot of my pre-war whiskey. "You're thinking yourself cleverer than your neighbour."

This, however, I would not allow.

"You know better. I am merely stating an opinion and asserting that if the fact of a murder were regarded as private and confidential ; if all concerned were warned and possibly segregated, like a jury, from their kind, and the public and newspapers remained in ignorance of the event until the police had enjoyed a space of secret inquiry, much would be gained for justice. Of course you can't hide some murders; but many might be hidden, as in this case. Assuming we have a murder on our hands, have you asked yourself what the murderer is doing and thinking? His preliminary uneasiness is completely set at rest. He may have observed that his victim has been mentioned among the missing, but every day that intervenes between his act and the present is increasing his, or their, sense of security. Doubtless in this case the assassins already move among accustomed haunts and go about their usual business; but the point for me is that they feel dead safe by now. They may, or may not, have heard of the suicide of John Fleming. In any case, there is nothing we know that can connect that event with their own victim; and even if they knew as well as we do, that Fleming had found the dead man and changed places with him, their own sense of security would be by so much increased and they would only feel that the last shadow of danger was removed.

"There lies my strength—thanks to your sporting attitude."

"Then, instead of any more talk, I should go to it," said Forbes.

"I go to it to-morrow morning," I answered. "I go to Plymouth by an early train, and I have a strong suspicion that the finding of Fleming may prove far the easiest item of the challenge. By your leave I will take his banjo with me. He will now be called 'James Maclaren', or 'Archibald Tomkins', or 'Dante Rossetti' or 'Beethoven Smythe' and he will be strongly disposed to bluff; but when I show the lad his old familiar banjo, any inclination to take a high hand must instantly diminish."

"You shall have it," promised Forbes, and I perceived his old admiration for me reviving. He could not keep it out of his eyes; but he restrained any attempt to put it into words.

On the following morning, armed with the banjo in its case and my own luggage, I proceeded to Plymouth and took a room at the 'Mount Edgcombe' Hotel.

I am much attached to this famous town, for my boyhood was spent in it and I have perambulated the Hoe at intervals since childhood. My instinct on arriving is always to ascend to the grassy slopes over-looking the Sound, scan the familiar landmarks, try my eyes upon the new Eddystone lighthouse and possibly climb Smeaton's old one, which, now re-erected on the solid earth, looks out upon the Channel and the scene of its ancient struggle with the elements. There is now an added joy in the shape of the Marine Aquarium, and my steps invariably tend to that theatre of amusement and instruction. I decided to entertain myself here for a few hours before beginning serious work and, albeit the problem before me had occupied the journey, the exact nature of the task was yet exceedingly vague. My line of thought tended to nothing definite, for the reason that the name of the man I sought remained unknown. That I should recognise him if I saw him, and that I might be as likely to meet him in one place as another was the only conclusion to which I had yet come. I asked myself what he was probably about, and the answer depended upon another utterly unknown factor: his resources. It appeared probable that the dead man was not carrying any very large sum of money; but, on the other hand, he might have been, for I could think of no lesser inducement strong enough to make John Fleming change places with him. Milly—I always thought of her as Milly—would possibly have some savings to support them. I concluded that Fleming was seeking for work, or perhaps returning to his art and tempting the people of Plymouth to listen to his songs. In the event my supposition proved perfectly correct and I had the future satisfaction of telling Forbes about it; but I was by no means so certain before the thing actually happened as I pretended to be afterwards.

My lunch eaten, to the Hoe I went, inspected the great war memorial and liked it better than on my first visit, marked the shipping, picked up the Eddystone pharos fourteen miles distant on a grey sea, and then began to find myself drifting downhill towards the Aquarium. I spent a pleasant hour with the lobsters and pondered about the possible culinary value of a bright blue one, then returned to the air, and sauntered down to the Barbican as the dusk began to thicken over sea and land.

A crowd and an altercation challenged me and, approaching the disturbance, I found myself face to face with a very agitated John Fleming! He stood irate and evidently much perturbed, while a man far smaller than himself and a ferocious little woman indicated that they were exceedingly angry with him. The assembled onlookers laughed. As far as I could gather Fleming, who was provided with a new banjo, had intruded upon the pitch of an Italian accordion player and incurred his unreasonable indignation. He was evidently trying to make the little fellow understand that England is a free country and he had a right to the pitch, but there were two to one and, quickly perceiving that it was idle to argue, Fleming slung his banjo on to his back and made off. For this I had waited, and now, full of elation and surprise at my good fortune, I trailed after him. He stopped when he had left the Barbican, mopped his face and stood staring before him, while his peace of mind slowly returned. More people know Tom-fool, than Tom-fool knows, and while I had recognised him without difficulty, I felt no fear that my inconspicuous exterior would have been remembered by him, even had his eyes ever fallen upon me at Daleham.

He paused but a minute, then went on his way and presently took a tram, into which I had just time to jump as it proceeded. It was bound for the suburb of Mannamead, but he left it before we reached Mutley Plain and I did the like, very nearly missing him while I stopped to pay my fare.

However, there was no difficulty, for he mooned along slowly and stopped for a few minutes at a baker's to buy some pastry. I watched the transaction through the window, and as it was now dark, followed him pretty closely and finally ran him to earth in a small street not far from Charles Church. He went straight in and shut the door behind him, and having noted the name of the street and the number of the dwelling, I returned to my hotel.

There seemed no object in delay, so after a cup of tea and a pipe I set forth again, hired a taxi-cab and bade the driver deposit me at the corner of West Street. A minute later, carrying John Fleming's banjo in its case, I rang at his lodgment and a girl answered the summons.

"The young gentleman that plays the banjo, Miss," I said. "He'll be expecting me."

"Mr. Brown—that's right. Step this way," she answered, without suspicion, and having deposited the banjo on a chair in the little hall, I followed the girl. With her hand upon a door-knob she stopped and questioned me.

"What name might it be?" she asked.

"Meredith," I answered, whereupon she opened the door and announced me.

"Mr. Meredith to see you, sir," she said.

I entered and the door shut behind me. The room was lighted by a gas bracket on one side of a looking-glass over the mantel-shelf. It differed in no way from the usual lodging-house parlour, being true to type in every respect. Oleograph, table-cloth, aspidistra—all were there, nor lacked the peculiar side-board and dire china ornaments only to be found in these places. A young man jumped up from one side of the fire and a young woman rose from the other, while I came forward and shook hands with the greatest cordiality.

"Mr. Brown I have already seen to-day," I said, "but—Mrs. Brown?"

"My sister," interrupted the young man nervously. "Pardon me, but I think there must be some mistake. We are not residents of Plymouth."

The girl was pretty and attractive. She had a slight figure and graceful deportment. Her eyes were dark brown and her hair black, while her wistful mouth was beautifully modelled. An air of native distinction marked her and her voice was restrained and educated. She was of moderate height and John Fleming stood six inches taller than his sweetheart. Both were nervous, but Milly concealed her emotions better than the man. He stood fumbling with his cigarette, evidently on thorns for me to realise my mistake and depart; but from the first Miss Abbot, I fancy, entertained a truer suspicion that I had not come in error. She had started and her brown face contracted with passing fear when I spoke of having seen her sweetheart already.

At the risk of being thought weak-minded, I proceeded to develop the situation in my own way.

"We are strangers," I replied, "but I am not here by accident. I was a casual witness to your discomfiture on the Barbican, when that ruffianly little Italian and his wife evidently thought you had jumped their claim and succeeded in driving you off it. Not the incident, however, brings me here; but the fact that I saw your nerves were out of order and you lacked the courage and resolution to treat the alien as he deserved. May I sit down?"

The man stared blankly at me and did not answer, but his companion proved more gracious.

"Of course, sit down," she said, brought a chair and set it between them. "Sit down, Harold, the gentleman saw you were not well, and he saw right."

Fleming recovered his equilibrium and showed his relief by an inclination to slight me.

"Are you a doctor?" he asked.

"I am. I don't run about diagnosing strangers as a rule; but your highly-wrought and tense condition points, if I may say so, to rather a grave disturbance."

The man looked first at me and then at his companion.

"If I wanted a doctor, I'd send for one," he replied.

I took my pipe from my pocket and loaded it.

"You wish me to go away," I said, "but believe me you may be entertaining an angel in disguise. Be patient, therefore. How old are you?"

He began to suspect that he was dealing with a harmless eccentric and smiled at Milly.

"I'm twenty-eight," he answered.

"And look thirty-eight. Now listen."

I broke off, lighted my pipe, registered the expressions on their faces and crept to my surprise.

"Nature, my dear Mr. Brown, tells us so much more than we have the wits to hear, or the intelligence to heed. If there is one sure sign that a man is growing old sensibly, we find it in the fact that he bestows increasing attention to Nature's voice and increasing submission to her direction. Such a man respects Nature's information conveyed to him through his body and acts upon it. But we find the majority ignoring direction, council, warning, until Nature will be flouted no longer and the doctor has to be called in."

Fleming had winked at Milly, but was ignorant of the fact that I observed the gesture. His confidence became restored and he proceeded, not unkindly, to pull my leg.

"I'm afraid people who listen to Nature's voice are generally half-way to being cranks, Doctor Meredith," he declared, "that, at least, is my experience."

Thus he opened the way and I delayed no longer. I laughed and shook my head.

"Your experience wouldn't sink a ship, would it? You speak with the arrogance of youth, believing that Nature is always on the side of the young," I began. "But this young woman knows very well that you are suffering from painful nervous stress and storm, which is rendering you fretful and difficult. You are the 'difficult' type—neurasthenic—artistic—far too self-centred and inclined to morbidity. An unappreciated musician, I'll wager. However, if you don't want a few sane tips about your health, be sure I shan't offer them. In any case a mental shock and thorough jolt may sometimes serve tonic purposes and shake a man out of a rut of depression, or undue complacency. And that's what you are going to get now, my friend."

Fleming had a refined, rather handsome face, with large thoughtful eyes. I saw in him much the man whom I expected to see. His physiognomy fitted my theory, for here was the sort of weakness that might be strung up to desperation and so, for a moment, take on the semblance of strength. He was not the lad to act in cold blood; but might well do courageous, even heroic deeds under compulsion of circumstance, or once driven beyond any dread of consequence.

I guessed what he had done beyond possibility of doubt, and the man himself supported my theory. Here was one capable of just such an uncanny act; but he possessed the qualities of his defects and was already suffering for the past, though the nature and cause of his suffering I had yet to learn. Its effects, in shattered nerves and secret mental distress, were apparent enough.

Blood rushed to his face at my remark and his confidence was dispelled. The woman also showed uneasiness.

I re-lighted my pipe and the man spoke again.

"Who are you?" he asked, "and what do you want? I resent this intrusion and shall be much obliged if you will go away. I am busy to-night."

But I was not quite ready yet and kept him on tenter-hooks a little longer while my psychological study continued.

"I should doubt," I said, "whether a banjo is an instrument sufficiently developed to 'express the individuality' of a man like yourself."

He started at the familiar phrase, which I had borrowed from his landlady.

"A modest artist, or one of coarse pattern, might find a banjo sufficient accompaniment for his slight gifts," I continued, "but, if I am a judge, you possess an intelligence and probably artistic ideals that rise beyond such a primitive instrument."

The praise warmed him, but his conscience told him that danger lurked behind it. Not so his companion. She clapped her hands with joy.

"There, Harold, what did I tell you ?" she cried, and he scowled at her ; but she ignored him and turned to me.

"The very echo of what my brother knows and feels himself, Doctor ?" she said.

"I'm sure he does," I answered. "It takes all sorts of artists to make an orchestra, and happily there are men who are content to express themselves on instruments of percussion and so on—drums, cymbals and these resounding and plangent new noises that modern composers desire. The music of the spheres, perhaps, as in Holst's 'Planets' for example. We need them and they are to be had. But, if I mistake not, Harold here is by instinct a soloist and——"

"He's ordered a harp," she said. "He knows how to play the harp and he'll soon play well enough to do it in public and express his individuality properly. A beautiful instrument, Doctor ?"

"Very beautiful indeed, and it's like his pluck, I'm sure, to tackle such a difficult one. Good luck to him."

Then I made my stroke in the same quiet conversational voice.

"But why—why call him 'Harold', Miss Abbot, when his name is 'John'? Why does he masquerade as 'Mr. Brown' when, in truth, he is Mr. Fleming? Why pretend you are his sister when he has the great good fortune to be your sweetheart?"

She shrank into her chair and grew very white; he jumped up with a great gasp, half of astonishment, half of thanksgiving. His theatrical spirit manifested itself.

"It's come, by God!" he shouted, "and thank God it's come!"

Relief rather than fear marked his emotion and he became absurdly dramatic.

"Put them on!" he cried, and thrust out his long arms and lean wrists at me with a frantic gesture, while the woman leapt up and hastened to come between us.

"Put what on?" I asked, simulating surprise. "What on earth does this mean, John Fleming?"

"Don't torture any more," he commanded sternly, recovering his balance. "It is not your place to do that. You don't surprise me. It's only your snaky, damned methods of approach that surprise me. But you're trained to lie by your filthy calling."

"Medical men are not trained to lie," I answered. "I've told you no lie, though you appear to be acting one—for reasons you may divulge, or conceal, as you please. I am no detective and have nothing whatever to do with the police. But it happens that I made a very curious discovery after the inquest on your supposed remains at Daleham and, at the present moment, there is only one other man in existence—a tried and faithful, personal friend—who shares my knowledge that you are alive and not dead and buried. I discovered that a man committed to the grave in your name at Daleham was not John Fleming, and since there is attached a very sinister significance to that discovery, I set out for purely personal reasons to find John Fleming if I could, and learn from him all that he might be able to tell me regarding the unknown. This is not a public or police matter so far, and it depends entirely upon yourself whether it will prove so. I heartily trust not."

"It is a police matter," he said. "We know that well enough, and so probably do you."

"Then consult your own judgment and Miss Abbot's before you gratify my wish," I answered. "I want you to understand that I am a potential friend. I have no quarrel whatever with you. You are merely a subject of very considerable interest, but my knowledge of human nature is such that I do not see in you a man capable of any very tremendous crime.”

“I have committed a great crime,” the man declared; but his betrothed denied it.

“Tell all, John,” she begged. “It was no great crime. Let the gentleman know everything and believe him when he says that he means you no harm whatever. Get it out for your peace, and thank God it’s a kindly fellow creature has found you and not an enemy.”

“I, too, have something interesting to tell you, Mr. Fleming”, I said, “but my information will keep until I have heard your story. Be wise and tell me everything there is to tell. Don’t invent, or give your artistic imagination any play whatever, but just stick to facts. In all probability the better I know them, the more use I may be to you young people. Some interesting things happened while I was engaged in the task of finding you—together as I expected. But let me have your story first—every word of it. And do trust me. I come to the narrative as an outsider—not as a policeman, remember.”

He hesitated, and while he made up his mind I turned to Milly.

“Can you get me a cup of tea, my dear?” I

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asked, and perhaps something in my tone of voice thereupon decided the banjo-player to be frank.

"I'll tell you every damned thing from the very first," he said.

"Jolly wise of you," I answered, and he collected his thoughts while the girl left the room for a few minutes.

"Wait till she comes back," he snapped out: and when she had returned with the tea, John Fleming told his tale, roaming restlessly up and down the room as he did so.

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CHAPTER V

FLEMING'S STORY

For a time Fleming walked the carpet while I sipped my tea. One knew that, even in his present equivocal position, the artist in him was at work and he designed to tell his tale to the best possible advantage.

Suddenly he started.

"I'm going to put everything before you, since you say you feel no ill-will and come as a spectator to the affair only and are merely concerned to know the facts. I believe that and I trust you. If my trust is abused, that will be no new experience. I was left an orphan at an early age and have been making some sort of living since I was a boy. I'm an artist, unfortunately for myself, and a musician. There was nobody to help me and when an old aunt living on an annuity died, I began life in utter loneliness and struggled along as a shop-boy till I found something more to my taste. My adventures don't matter, or my ups and downs. I kept alive, and two years ago went to Ealing and practised as an itinerant musician. Once I got a chance at a music-hall. They gave me an 'audition' as they call it; I impressed them as a highly original comedian, and they let me do an extra turn. But you need other gifts than mine and the power to paint with a broad brush in the music halls. My subtle humour utterly failed. They laughed me off halfway through my turn and I had to take it with a smile. I laughed too—with death in my heart—and turned my back on the footlights and saw my hopes lying dead at my feet. Thank God that was before I met Milly."

"They told you that you must come back some day when you had mastered the game and try again," Miss Abbot reminded him.

"Yes, they were sporting enough," he admitted, and then continued. "At Ealing I met Milly and did her a service in the street, when the perambulator she was wheeling got messed up with a tramline. We grew to know each other and she did me the honour to come for a walk sometimes on her day out. She was the light to my darkness, as you may imagine, and I soon found that I was in love with her, and didn't want to carry on if she were unable to share my melancholy existence. She was an orphan and hadn't much to look forward to in life, but the pleasure of working for her living till she went on an old age pension.

"I loved her and my wits told me that she was beginning to care for me; but I had nothing to offer and was only living from hand to mouth as usual. We 'kept company', however, as they say, for another six months after our first meeting and I felt that there was a pretty close understanding between us. Of course she can understand anything, and she very well knew why I didn't speak the word and lay my heart at her feet. Always sympathetic she was and always patient with me, and ready to cheer my darkest hours. But I knew a woman wouldn't do all that for a man and put hope into him and encourage him and endure his infernal selfishness and egotism if she didn't love him."

"You were never selfish," said the girl.

"Then," he went on, "she got a better job—one she had always been set on—and her employer gave her an introduction to some swells and she went as lady's maid to a Lady Fordham. I guessed that she expected me to speak when we separated and she left Ealing; but I wouldn't. I worshipped her by then; but I wasn't going to tie her to a pauper and spoil her chances of future happiness. A proud fool to feel like that; but my pride didn't last very long. She took to her new job and proved, what was vital to it, a splendid sailor. The Fordhams live more than half their idle lives on their steam yacht and are never happy ashore by all accounts. Anyway, in her second letter from Tor Grange, at Clyst, Milly told me that they were going to sea—for a long cruise through the Mediterranean; and by that time I well knew, if I was to make good in the land of the living, it would entirely depend upon her. When she was gone out of my life, night came down upon it and everything changed. I felt an instinct deep in my soul that my own cursed nature had come between me and my last hope of salvation. I told myself that without the promise and certainty of her love and our future union, I might as well take leave of existence, 'salute the unkindly world', cut my thread and end my sufferings; but it grew into a religion with me that if she loved me and, looking back and remembering, could still put her trust in my future and accept me, then life would surely change and, in the light of that rising sun, I should conquer circumstance and yet make good. 'If such a woman could love me', I said to myself, 'then it proves there is stuff in me that's strong enough to win out against life. She knows me better than I know myself, and for sheer shame, if she accepts me, I'll make a new break, and succeed, to be worthy of such a wonder!'"

"Dear Johnny," murmured the girl.

"Damn fool Johnny!" he answered. Then he went on.

"Summer came and I tried to get a show with a pierrot troupe: but they didn't want me and said I'd do better on my own. It was then that I wrote to Milly and offered her the lordly privilege of becoming Mrs. John Fleming. I put a bold face on it and didn't cry stinking fish, of course. I wrote the letter seven times, and the seventh and final edition I posted. She had doubts about the address in her last letter before leaving, but her mistress directed her in that matter, and I sent the letter to the yacht, care of post office at Genoa, to be called for. It got there too late, but letters were ordered to be forwarded and she just received it before the yacht sailed on her homeward way to England. That was a fortnight and two days after I had posted it. I'd had some picture post-cards from her and a letter from Greece, since she went.

"I ought to have been patient, but I'm not, and after I'd allowed a fortnight, according to my custom, founded on bitter experience, I began to take the usual dark view. The thing I'd done looked a cowardly and feeble thing. By day I faced it out and made myself hope; by night I knew to the marrow in my bones that I had thrown my last cast and lost. There came one more picture post-card from Italy, but no mention of my letter.

"Then I planned to get away for a bit and told my landlady, Mrs. Wilson at Ealing, that I was going down to the seaside to try and make a few quid and pay her bill if no more. I'd got into a state when I had to break fresh ground and distract my thoughts if I didn't want to go mad. That was three weeks after my infernal letter had gone, and I felt very sure it must be all up. At times reason had a struggle with me and reminded me of the distance and the uncertainties of a yachting cruise; but I'd faced and accepted the horror of failure before I went to Daleham, and had already pretty well determined with myself to finish in the sea at an early date. Not a particularly good frame of mind to try and earn money by amusing holiday people; but so it was with me."

He broke off, lighted a cigarette, puffed at it furiously for a few moments, then threw it into the grate.

"Clearly and admirably told, Mr. Fleming," I said. "You have the gift of narrative."

He laughed sourly.

"No gifts are worth a curse without the gift of luck," he answered.

"Get on with it, Johnny," begged the girl. "Come to Daleham."

"I went to Daleham and calming down a bit in the Devonshire air, determined to be patient a little longer. To some people patience is easy and natural. They're born so, like a cow. But my life was hanging in the balance and patience meant an excruciating effort to me. I carried on, played the mountebank and prayed for time to fly. I determined to wait a month and, at the end of that geological era, felt my fears were justified and all was indeed over. From time to time Mrs. Wilson wrote begging for an instalment. It tore my heart not to send it, for I had spoken hopefully of my chances; but I made practically no money at Daleham. People were attracted by my grotesque appearance, but it was the old story: they had no use for my subtle humour or skilled playing.

"My mind was now made up and it is absolutely true to say that when I told Mrs. Friend—my Daleham landlady—that I was going to end it, I meant what I said. Another fortnight had drifted by and my hopes and resources were alike finished. When I set out for the wild coast line that evening with salvation in my pocket, I planned to tramp forward until darkness fell and no eye could mark my movements. Then I would walk out over the rocks above deep water and fling myself into the sea.

"The night was unusually bright and fair and I well remember stopping more than once upon that deserted shore to admire the sunset over the bay. It lighted the sleeping sea and played with rosy and genial splendour upon the cliffs and the populous, western facing earth, where Riverton stood, its terraced and uplifted dwellings made magical by the sleight of the after-glow. Like golden spires shone the masts of the yachts in the harbour, and little did I guess that among them rose the spars of the 'Mignonette' which had just borne Milly from the South. She was gone by then to Clyst with the family, but the yacht remained there, and from Riverton only two days before her letter had reached Ealing—the letter now forgotten in my pocket!

"What little things confound life and alter the whole tenour of a man's future. Had old Mrs. Wilson re-directed that letter as one would have expected her to do; had I seen the handwriting upon it; had I read it, I should not stand here now —a criminal."

"You are not a criminal!" cried Milly. "Tell Mr. Meredith the facts and leave him to judge."

"In the eyes of the law and in the eyes of my own conscience I am a criminal," he answered, and then proceeded, forgetting to be theatrical as the narrative advanced, but again giving rein to his romantic spirit later.

"I stumbled forward beyond the farthest point of former rambles and felt conscious of the loneliness and loveliness of my last vision of earth. And then, while it was still light enough to see detail, I arrived at that little cave already known to me, marked the long flat ridges of sea-weed covered rocks extending from it into the water, and decided that I need proceed no further. Guessing the possibility of chance spectators on the cliffs above, I determined to wait awhile until darkness fell and turned into the mouth of the cavern, where no chance eye might mark me.

"And then I saw a fellow-creature at my feet, guessed for a moment that he must be asleep and cursed him for choosing this spot and intruding upon my last performance.

"Only an accident opened my eyes to the truth, for passing him softly at a distance of two yards, I slipped, fell into a shallow pool and made a devil of a row. He did not move, however ; then, looking at him from close quarters, there seemed something about him that roused my suspicion, and for a moment turned my mind from my own affairs. He lay a few feet below the marks of the last high tide and there was a stranded look about the man, as though he formed no more than part of the other rubbish which the sea had garnered from the deep and thrown here to rest upon the shingles of the cave. At a nearer sight I observed also how he occupied a very unusual position for a sleeper. And then it flashed upon me that I must be in the presence of death.

"You do not need to be told the effect of this discovery at such a moment upon a being cursed with my morbid imagination. Instantly I suspected that I was gazing upon an unfortunate like myself, but luckier than myself, in that he had already taken the plunge and lay beyond the fret of life, or the pang of death. I felt a human wave of sympathy touch me and approached him, knelt down by him and examined him. A curious feeling came to me at that solemn moment—a vague sub-conscious emotion that I was already separated from my own body, that I had done the deed and now, translated to another plane, actually regarded the lifeless husk of all my own past sorrows and tribulation. The man was much of my own build—tall and rather thin. His sleek hair was the colour of mine; but there the resemblance ceased, for his face was deathly white, his sightless but open eyes, brown, his lips full and heavy, his chin large. He had not been dead long, I judged, but long enough for his garments to have nearly dried upon him. He was a yachting man and clad in well cut clothes of blue serge. He wore a soft shirt, and upon his hand was a gold ring with a diamond of large size in it. His waistcoat bore a gold watch and chain. That much I marked and then, looking irresolutely out upon the sea, I noticed that his yachting cap was stranded below and went down and picked it up and put it beside him.

"I cannot analyse my varied feelings before this sudden challenge. Ordinary human instincts—to return to my fellow men and announce my discovery—clashed with my own private purposes. I argued this way and that, and was finally mastered by a purely natural spirit of curiosity to learn, if possible, who the unknown dead man might be. He had clearly been drowned and washed to shore at some recent date, and I saw in a flash that accident and not self-destruction might be responsible for his end. I felt no fear or distaste in his presence. I had but once seen a corpse in my life before, but the spectacle occasioned no uneasiness or commotion in my mind. I envied his placidity and peace and the air of contentment upon his unattractive features.

"Search produced nothing but a handkerchief of dark crimson silk which matched the dead man's socks and tie, a fat pocket-book and a bunch of keys.

"For once I forgot myself and my affairs and allowed myself to be dominated by pure curiosity concerning the dead man. What irony of fate that a mean instinct-like curiosity should awaken at such a moment! For I was never an inquisitive man. I opened the pocket-book, expecting to find letters directed to him, cards, or other evidence of his identity; but I was disappointed and mystified. The solid and uninjured case contained absolutely nothing whatever but money. In one compartment appeared some silver and half a dozen notes for one pound and ten shillings, while the main pocket of the thing contained a large packet of new Bank of England notes. I counted them and found they amounted to five hundred pounds of the denomination of ten pounds each.

"On the flap of the wallet were the letters 'L.S.D.' stamped in gold, but no indication of any sort or kind to throw one ray of light upon the defunct owner himself. I examined his clothing then, but neither his silk underwear, his linen, or his suit contained so much as a laundry mark.

"I might dwell on the marvellous nerve and self-control I displayed myself under this strange ordeal;

but I will pass on, Doctor Meredith, to the sequel and my own extraordinary reaction to my discovery. Had anybody set such a problem before me and asked me what I should have done in such circumstances, I should doubtless have answered promptly. I should have said my certain course would be to go to the police, hand over the wallet, and report my discovery. We all think that we know what we should do under given circumstances ; but few of us really know exactly what we shall ever do till the hour strikes and the problem it brings with it has to be faced.

"I found myself admirably calm and steady as I pondered the situation and considered its possibilities. Here was obviously a rich man who had gone where five hundred pounds could be of no further use to him. Where he was bound to on earth before he left it, did not matter now ; but the contents of his purse seemed to shout at me, saying, 'Look ! Here is nobody's money ! Its owner has no more use for it. Take it, then ; face life again ; put this stuff to sane purposes and justify your continued existence by its aid !'

"I did nothing precipitate, for the determination to commit suicide was too deeply-rooted to be dispelled in a moment by the spectacle of this unlimited cash. I considered the problem and even weighed its ethical aspect. To rob the dead seemed a base thing to do: it might commit one to further woes and weigh the scales of chance more heavily against me in time to come. But reason spoke with a clear voice. The gods seldom give you a second chance, and I decided that I should be a weak-kneed fool not to accept such an opportunity and try to turn this rotting paper to intelligent use. Caution suggested that the notes were certainly numbered and known; cowardly fear whispered danger; but common sense, of which I possess but little, for once came to the rescue. It was clear enough that I did not confront some dead criminal. The money must doubtless be his own—drawn for some definite purpose—perhaps to pay the wages of a yacht's crew. I guessed that he must be an affluent yachtsman who had met with an accident off his craft, and I doubted not that the newspapers would speedily proclaim his disappearance if they had not already done so.

"It was this thought that egged me on to my ultimate action—a thing incredibly unlike myself, and yet not unlike myself, in that it argued a mind not lacking a spark of originality—perhaps actual genius. I had already determined to take the money, indifferent to the sequel even if I were discovered and ultimately charged with theft; but now, considering the position, there flashed upon me the means by which any future difficulties might be evaded altogether. First I reflected that in this lonely spot the man might lie for weeks, or even months, before his remains would be seen by a fellow man. The holiday season was ending and no chance stroller would be likely to extend his rambles so far for many a long day. That was the point; but against it I admitted that some wandering fisherman might find him to-morrow. The chances, however, were all against immediate discovery. The betting appeared to be that he must lie here for a lengthy period—a period sufficient to obliterate his identity and cash his money. I then turned to myself. I had left my lodgings with wild words and the threat of self-destruction. I should not return to them, and it was then probable my landlady might go to the police with the story. They might institute a search, or they might not. They would possibly inquire at Ealing and find no information concerning relatives, or friends. That done they might proceed no further in the matter, having no inducement so to do.

"If they hunted and found at once, the dead might offer elements of doubt; but give him a few weeks and then a mouldering corpse clad in my clothes would offer no grounds whatever for suspicion.

"You see I had got to that stage then and convinced myself that much might be gained for me by changing places with the dead. I faced the prospect with iron nerve and determination, and none who ever knows this story can say of me again that I lack the material strength of character to achieve anything I may be minded to do."

He stopped and took comfort from this conviction.

"The man had not been dead long, but he had been out of the water some time. Whether a high tide put him where I found him and did not reach him again, or whether he got there some other way, I wondered afterwards, but not at the moment. I took off his clothes, which was not difficult, nor did I lack the courage to get into them myself. Incidentally they fitted almost perfectly and they were nearly dry. Getting the dead man into my own things was harder; but I did it; and while I performed these tasks subconsciously, my mind was full of my next move. It did not take long to determine that. Once rigged, to the hat on my head, I set out for a cliff-path which I knew lay behind me on the way back, and after some difficulty hit on it, ascended to the high ground and set off as hard as I could go to Daleham Junction.

"Before starting, however, I threw the dead man's keys, his diamond ring and his watch far into the sea. I was not fool enough to suppose that annexation of these would be any more wrong than to take his money; but if there were hue and cry for him, as I guessed there would be, then these things might be exceedingly dangerous if found upon me. Of course, my very first move on the following day was determined: I should get out of the yachtsman's kit as swiftly as possible and destroy every atom of it. Then, from the windows of my new existence, I should watch the result, doubtless learn the history of the dead man and, sooner or later, hear of the discovery of John Fleming's bones."

The musician then proceeded to detail incidents with which I was familiar. His account of reaching Daleham Junction and departure therefrom to Redchester in a luggage train confirmed what I had already heard from the railway men, and he next indicated his future operations after arriving at London.

"I had planned everything before I got there," he said, "and as soon as the shops were open, found a place for ready-made clothing in Praed Street and dived into it. I had already purchased a suit-case elsewhere. I explained to the shopman that I had been called to London on urgent private business from my yacht and had only just had time to catch the night mail without changing my clothes. He furnished an adequate suit and within two hours I was out of London again on my way to Plymouth. I have great regard for Plymouth and the neighbourhood, and came here to plan my future life and consider what best to do with it, supported by these newly-acquired resources. Incidentally, I changed all the bank notes as quickly as possible.

"The instinct to continue a free lance and practise my art did not leave me, though it might have done so had the way been clear to seek work of a more enduring kind; but caution indicated the impossibility of that, seeing that I was beginning life as a new man without any past to which I might refer a prospective employer. I had some knowledge of the harp and felt that with assiduous practice I might soon play it well enough to perform in public. It is a cumbrous instrument, but it conveys the suggestion of a more or less serious artist, and I had been acquainted with men who, lacking my natural skill, yet contrived to make a satisfactory living upon it.

"I entered into transactions for procuring a second-hand harp, and finding by good chance an old man who played it well and gave lessons upon it, I have for the last six weeks devoted myself to that study—I think with success. Indeed, the new harp has already reached me and I had designed to make my first public appearance next week.

"Meantime I bought another banjo and carried on at my old business, but without the comic 'make-up' I used to employ.

"During the next six weeks I naturally read the newspapers pretty closely for any possible information concerning myself, or the unknown; but nothing transpired, and I have always wondered why one never learned anything of that apparently rich and prosperous person who had met a sudden death and disappeared from the circles in which he was wont to move. So far as that goes I am wondering still, and if you have any news of him, I should be glad to hear it."

"Very little—indeed none at all concerning his identity," I answered, "but finish your own story and then I will tell you mine."

"The rest of mine you can pretty well guess," he replied, "and if you are a feeling man, you can also form a pretty acute idea of my emotions when I heard the sequel. I was contented with the huge change in my fortunes, well pleased to begin the business of living again and determined at some future time to return my loan from the dead to his lawful heirs, should they ever be discovered, or present a substantial offering to some hospital in years to come as an acknowledgment to Providence. This resolution set my conscience at rest and I had already determined to send Mrs. Wilson a complete discharge of my debts to her for her surpassing goodness and generosity. But that little matter was for a time forgotten by the report of my fancied discovery.

"I read it in the *Western Morning News* and gathered how, had I indeed committed suicide, salvation would have been lying in my pocket while I did so."

He broke off and put his hand on Milly's shoulder, while she lifted her own to it and caressed it.

"She had posted from Riverton—only a few miles from Daleham—and the letter went first to Ealing, was delayed a day and reached me at the critical moment of my fortunes. Where was she now? Six weeks—nearly seven—had passed since that tremendous moment; and they had passed for her without one sign from me! Had she been seeking me? Had she been waiting with gathering distress and wonderment at my extraordinary silence? I left my breakfast untasted upon this table, fled to a public telephone office and directed a call to the address given in her letter. She might still be there or, if not, they would doubtless know where she was gone. I guessed that the yacht might have sailed again and Milly with it; but fortune favoured me and I reached her only a short time before she was starting with her employer for another cruise.

"My hope was that I might reach her ear before the sensational incidents recorded in the morning paper had done so; but I was too late for that. She had already suffered the agony of supposing me dead by my own hand. But her resolute mind moves swiftly and, once conscious that all was well with me, my precious girl soon recovered and faced action with her usual energy and courage. I thought quickly and directed her to keep her secret with utmost care, to leave at once, on the plea of her terrible distress and hasten to Waterloo. I warned her that silence might be vital to my own fortunes, explained that I would come up the line as far as Salisbury on the Southern Railway to meet her train and directed her to tell Lady Fordham that she was going to friends for the present, but would communicate with her at a later time.

"And that is all there is to it, Doctor, so help me God. I met Milly and explained the plans I had made; told her everything and arranged with her that we should be brother and sister for the present until time had passed. Her understanding and quick sense of the situation and moral support went far to make a new man of me, and we have already planned to leave Plymouth shortly, be married, and possibly try our united fortunes in the Colonies if all goes well."

He ceased, flung himself into a chair, took another cigarette from a packet in his pocket and waited for me to speak.

I began by praising his narrative.

"A tale well told, and with good choice of words. Have you ever considered the possibilities of writing? With your highly-strung temperament you might find that you approached the public more happily from your desk than in the street. The necessity to express yourself and your art through the medium of your own body, must always be a great handicap to temperamental people like you."

"There!" cried Miss Abbot, "that's an idea, Johnny!"

But the artist was not so sure.

"Music is greater than literature," he said, and feeling in no mood to argue this assertion, I brought him back to the dead man.

"What did you do with the clothes?" I asked.

"Destroyed them," he answered promptly. "Bit by bit in my own fire—a little at a time—I burned every scrap of everything that came off that man except the money."

"The case that contained it too?"

"Yes. Every scrap. I wasn't happy till the last atom had been destroyed."

"And you heard nothing as to whom it might be?"

"Not a syllable. I kept a look out in the newspapers, but never saw a word about anybody missing. So one thing is clear: he wasn't a man of any account."

"An assumption, but possibly correct."

"You don't know who he is then, Doctor?"

"No. So far I have learned nothing concerning his identity, except that he was not John Fleming."

"And how on earth did you find out he was not John Fleming?" asked the young man.

"Various details convinced me of that. But what will interest you to know is that he wasn't drowned. In the sea he had been for an uncertain space of time, since his clothes indicated past immersion when you took them off him; but one of two things happened to that man to destroy him: he either committed suicide, or he was murdered."

"Good God! Murdered?"

"He was poisoned as I discovered, but have kept the knowledge, until this moment, to myself and one friend. If suicide, then he must have taken the dose in a capsule probably, as my search revealed no vessel to hold it ; if murdered, we cannot guess how the poison may have got into him. That he should have been in the water, yet high and nearly dry when you found him, is mysterious, for the tides would hardly have brought him so far. He wasn't in the water long, otherwise the paper money in his wallet would have been destroyed."

"The money was quite all right."

"Then where do we stand ? I had, of course, hoped that you might be able to throw some light on this affair, but, if anything, you have obscured it. Granted murder, there was clearly no robbery and the assassins worked for other motives. Your story increases the probability of suicide to my mind, yet it seems hard to see this prosperous person killing himself, disporting in the sea and then, somehow, wading or swimming ashore, to be found there soon after his demise. And harder still to hear no news of his disappearance."

"But you believe John, don't you, Doctor Meredith ?" asked Milly with anxiety.

"Rest quite assured on that," I begged her. "I believe John, and so far as I can see at present, John may be left out of the picture. John has helped himself to a heap of cash that didn't belong to him ; but since we have no idea to whom it did belong, I should say there is no immediate necessity to worry on that score. As I have already told you I have nothing whatever to do with the law. Accident led me to my inquiry and I propose to pursue it a little farther, though the prospect of getting to the bottom of it now begins to look faint. Try to recall the memory of this unfortunate man and tell me if anything characteristic challenged your attention. When he was ultimately found, time had advanced complete decay, and such were the ravages of seabirds or vermin that there was nothing obvious to oppose the natural evidence of his clothes, or rather your clothes."

But Fleming could not help me much.

"I only remember his full lips and staring brown eyes. I didn't look at him more than I could help. There wasn't so much class about his face as his clothes, if you understand me."

"I do—an interesting point. Some parvenu perhaps. A diamond ring on his finger and showy socks you say? Well, there's only one line of approach for me—a faint line; but for the moment, in all friendship, I want to consider you young people."

Mr. Fleming showed doubt as to whether he desired my further consideration; but Milly had determined to make me a friend. She revealed more natural curiosity than her lover, thanked me for my expression of goodwill and ventured to ask how I had discovered them.

"If it hadn't been a kind, good man like you, Doctor, it might have been very different for us," she declared.

"Nothing but your own very proper action led me to you both," I explained. "At Tor Grange I only learned that Milly had left and her direction was not yet known; but seeking news of John, I went to Ealing and had a pleasant talk with Mrs. Wilson. She was heartbroken over your young man, for whom she entertains nothing but devotion. I kept my secret, of course; but as I was leaving her and considering how to pursue the search, there came the postman. She recognised your writing, Miss Abbot, for she was familiar with it. She proved quick, also, to realise the nature of the contents. She judged that Johnny had told you of his debts and, for honour of his memory, you had defrayed them. I left her in that impression; but since the registered packet came from Plymouth, it needed no great flash of inspiration to guess where you both were."

"A good deed may get home on you as sharply as a bad one," said Fleming; but his sweetheart reproved him.

I left them with the promise that they would keep me informed of their movements, and undertook on my part to give them all future information that I might glean concerning the unknown dead. It occurred to me on my homeward way that I had been far too easy with the pair of them, yet I failed to perceive that a sterner line at this juncture could advance either the cause of justice, or my own abstract interest in the case. I liked them both, believed them, and felt it would be a pleasure to meet again. My personal disappointment was, of course, considerable, yet there rose a bracing quality in the thought that, so far, deduction and good luck had seen me successfully along the way.

For the rest much might turn on Inspector Forbes and such information as he had gleaned of persons reported missing, though from the first I doubted whether the defunct yachtsman would be discovered in that category.

CHAPTER VI

A CLUE

When my dear Newton Forbes had anything on his mind, he was wont to keep it there until we met and then unload his grievances at a high rate of speed. He would plunge into the most prodigious subject without any preliminaries whatever, expatiate upon it, indicate the ruin that was settling over England and the gathering clouds from which any hope of escape was impossible, sum up, pass sentence and then challenge me to gainsay a syllable of his conclusions. A taciturn and silent man as a rule, he reserved for me these outbursts, and I often deplored the particular quality of our friendship which broke down his usual reticence and opened the floodgates of his varied interest in life and somewhat gloomy view of it. But so it was, and one often bore the brunt of his emotion when least disposed to the ordeal. He felt strongly and spoke strongly on these occasions, and sometimes

I disagreed with him, yet oftener found myself of his mind, though not of his temper. Justice was the marrow in his bones and the injustices of life often threatened to suffocate his soul.

He always liked to open the conversation on our evenings together, and though when we met, after my return from Plymouth, I flattered myself that he would certainly be the listener to-night, he started almost before he had taken his usual arm-chair. Perturbation was in his eyes; he did not light his pipe; he appeared to forget that I might be rich with matter of great interest; so I knew that his spirit cried to be disburdened and resigned myself to a spate.

"I've been thinking, Doctor," he said. He always started with that assurance. "I've been thinking about this business of increasing crime, and I'm perfectly certain that the eugenists should concentrate not so much on the terms of life, but of brain and intellect. Our only hope lies there. What we English are now breeding in greatest abundance is rotten brains; and these inferior brains will be called to control the life of the country in the near future. Automatically and legally we set up barriers against future mentality; for how can we assist decent British brains to perpetuate their qualities through the species while we impose the present crushing restrictions upon them? Statesmanship has been prostituted to vote-catching under the absurdity of universal suffrage and all modern legislation is directed to support the unfit, so that intelligent, responsible people, over-taxed and over-governed, shrink from the honourable obligations of family, having far more thought and care for the unborn than those who rule over them and crush them out of procreative existence. We deliberately dam the potential supply of future intellect and leave the sluices open to inferior quality. Any microcephalus idiot, or half-wit, can breed, and thousands on the very border-land of imbecility are breeding. Education does not reach these people and birth-control sighs after them in vain; but, to keep this ocean of worthless and often anti-social life at full tide, the rest of us are penalised too heavily to take any hand in the next generation at all. Thus, in the briefest possible time under universal suffrage, since the worthless in our glorious democracy vote as well as breed, the balance of classes is destroyed; the Constitution goes down and, before the nation perceives its own destruction, it will have already ceased to be a nation at all."

He shook his head before this gloomy vision, sighed heavily and lighted his pipe.

"Those are the bitter facts," he said, "and you can take 'em, or leave them."

"Cheer up, Inspector," I begged, "and cherish for consideration other sleepless forces that don't depend on politicians. Granted that a race of fanatical, or cynical rulers are living from hand to mouth and the old high-minded and selfless generation of statesmen is a thing of the past—granted that self-seekers, unbalanced pedants and doctrinaires hold the helm and that political shibboleths and myopic seeing have made the business of Industry, Government and Law alike unclean, yet there are other and greater spirits of progress for ever concerned with human life. The *ethos* of a people—the social genius of their heredity and corporate soul—is subject to evolution, remember; and if we believe, as I do, that the evolutionary trend is upward, then we need not despair. You're a pessimist and I am an optimist in this matter; but I have lived long enough, and so have you, to see evolution engaged about her subtle, ceaseless work, and even a few generations of idiocy and futile social experiment are not going to confound that deep-rooted principle of mental betterment operating at the heart of humanity. Men are mad, but man continues to be sane. I share your contempt of democracy and see clearly enough where it is leading; but even assuming socialism in our time, followed by communism, despite its gory object-lessons from over the way, that is not the last word. Man is a child and his world is a planetary infant still."

"A fat lot of comfort in that for the rising generation," snorted Forbes. "Leave it, Doctor. Tell me how's Plymouth and if you are tired of hunting the banjo-player."

"I found the banjo-player in due course, my friend."

"You mean it?"

"Certainly. He fell into my lap. Things happened much as I had hoped and imagined they might. He wanted me to lock him up and felt honestly gratified that his ordeal had ended. A conscientious man really."

"Where is he now?"

"Still at Plymouth. Pray listen. I can assure you that, without a shadow of doubt, he told me the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

"We don't know the truth when we hear it often enough," answered Forbes, "but I'll give you the credit to admit that he spoke truth if you feel sure he did."

"Thank you for that," I answered and detailed the narrative of John Fleming in every particular.

"So we find," I concluded, "that this excitable young man has robbed and impersonated the dead —an achievement that really sounds more serious than it was. Had you listened to him, you had shared my conviction that he was telling the truth and that he is really not a criminal except in the academic sense."

But Forbes felt by no means disposed to admit as much. He was not a man possessed of the regulation policeman's mind by nature; but he had striven to acquire it, and his profession would often intrude upon his native instincts, which were humanitarian.

Seeing that he hesitated, I spoke again.

"Feel no uneasiness," I begged. "You are far more high-minded than myself, dear chap, and your sense of duty is such that it will doubtless interfere with your temporal advancement, as the sense of duty so often does in this ill-regulated world; but you have always granted my success, as a judge of character, and as a judge of character, I will stake my reputation on John Fleming. He will come up for judgment if and when I indicate that he must do so. I have won his trust and, what is more important, the trust of the young woman he proposes to marry. They are a decent, self-respecting pair and at present his ambition is to use this windfall wisely and so advance his own chances of making a living from practise of his art. He will keep me informed of his movements and, if they concern him, I shall keep him informed of mine. All that matters is the money, and should this mystery be solved and the secret of the dead man discovered, then, no doubt, I shall go into that with Fleming. He is quite sound on the subject."

"All very irregular," said Newton Forbes, "but I've put myself into your hands over this job, like the fool I am, and of course my word is my bond."

"Just so. And now where do we stand? The side-issue of the banjo-player's masquerade is cleaned up and we have yet to learn whose body has been buried for his. Seeing that the dead man was apparently rich and prosperous, the wonder increases that there has been no public announcement of his disappearance. But perhaps you have a pleasant surprise for me on that matter?"

"No," he answered. "There's no indication whatever that this man was reported missing. I have a list of wanted and vanished people, and your description of the dead, as seen by Fleming, doesn't come within a hundred miles of any of them."

He handed me the result of his inquiry with the names of six persons, who had disappeared from their places of abode and left no sign. Two were women, believed to be suffering from loss of memory, one was a girl; one, a youth of weak mind; two were men: 'The Rev. Jabez Adams', a Presbyterian Minister from Birmingham, lost on holiday in the peak of Derbyshire during September, and 'Lionel S. Daniel', of Messrs. Daniel & Co., The Old Curiosity Shop, Ford Street, London, W.

"This is indeed disappointing," I murmured, and the inspector grinned at me.

"You can't have it all your own way, son," he declared. "You didn't think this was going to turn out like an easy crossword puzzle, that you can do without a second thought, or Roget, or the dictionary? You've had your bit of luck; now it's going to be the turn of the Force. A private individual, without any of the huge and efficient machinery we have built up to stand as a barrier between civilisation and crime, can do practically nothing more single-handed. You've put up a great fight and been jolly lucky too. Mrs. Wilson's letter was a gift from the gods. But now you're up against it, Doctor. An unknown man has either committed suicide, or been murdered."

"Been murdered, Forbes. That is now exceedingly clear. Had he committed suicide, there would have been certain news of his disappearance for the police long before now."

"So I think. He must have a connection and relations and friends. There's a catch in it—a catch in the fact there has been no hue and cry. It means that nobody is suspecting harm to him and that the fact he is dead still remains unknown to his friends. The thing was probably engineered. It may still be imagined that he is on a yachting cruise, for example. He might have been poisoned and pitched off a yacht just leaving Riverton for six months. In a word the murder must come out, Doctor, and I'm afraid that means a black mark against me, and some unpleasant publicity for you. Tell me this: did Fleming, who saw the corpse before it had sunk into advanced decay, give you anything the least informing as to the man's face? Did he notice any distinctive marks on the body?"

I shook my head. These were minor matters, but the attitude that Forbes was taking caused me instant alarm.

"A bargain's a bargain," I said, "and this is no time to talk so lightly about breaking it. I am not beat yet. This is my case and there will be ample leisure to start your blessed machinery when I surrender it. You promised me. So far I have merely cleared the ground, and at the back of my mind there persists a very obstinate opinion that I am going to win through. Time is vital in these cases and I can't do impossibilities."

"What can you do?" he asked. "What can a private individual do to make this thing known and challenge the mind of the public at large? How is it possible for you to get information or call attention, in any vital quarter, to the death of this man?"

"To get information may prove beyond my power," I admitted, "in which case you can turn on your machine; but to call public attention is the last thing I want to do. You know my views on that subject. Granted a murder, then the people who committed it are now feeling absolutely secure and confident. That is what I would wish."

"And they have every reason to be," declared Forbes. "Tell me how you imagine it is possible for you to shake their security. They are beyond the reach of your utmost ingenuity, for the reason that there is not the shadow of a clue by which you can exercise it. You don't even know who the dead man was. That, at least, the police might be able to discover and so create a fulcrum for the levers of the law. But what on earth can you do?"

"Much, Newton," I replied with confidence. "For the moment I only ask you to keep your promise. As to your question, which I was too disturbed to answer, John Fleming could throw no light. He could only say as a reply to my inquiry on the point, that the dead man was clean-shaved, had hair like his own and like that of ninety-nine people out of a hundred, and that his lips were prominent, his chin heavy, his eyes brown. In any case a more elaborate account had not helped us much, because dead people have a strange and mysterious art to change their expressions. From the face of the dead much that was apparent in life is ruled out, and it seems that Nature knows a merciful sleight to leave only what is the best of them and banish the base and ignoble."

But Forbes had returned to the main proposition.

"You want more time," he said, "and though the more time you waste, the greater our ultimate difficulties may be, a promise is a promise. I must pay for being an ass and giving you a free hand. I see that, since you are so infernally obstinate. You're using this promise as a sort of blackmail really, Doctor."

"Order !" I answered. "You know me too well——"

"I know you a great deal too well for my peace of mind," he grumbled.

"You know me too well to believe me an

unreasonable man. I quite see that there must be a time limit to these adventures, and if you are really determined from your morbid sense of duty, to give our show away to Scotland Yard, then you must do so. But be sporting. There was never any question of limited time. I should be perfectly in my right to demand another year for my difficult task; but not so. I demand that you give me a clear six weeks, and if at the end of them I don't tell you enough to justify further trust, then you can do any silly thing you please. Six weeks, brother."

He agreed, but the demand, coupled with my professed confidence, awakened distrust.

"You've got something up your sleeve that you haven't told me," he said.

"Something in the remote recesses of my capacious mind, not up my sleeve," I admitted. "It is nothing that I can tell, for the idea remains too vague even for formulation—a shadow lacking the least substance as yet. But why suppose my luck is finished? Why not be generous and believe Providence, smiling on my theory: that we do not tackle crime from the right end and bring profound secrecy rather than newspaper publicity to the business, is going to reward me and prove that I am right? In which case I may be the man to revolutionise our procedure and put a valuable weapon into the hands of future generations of police."

"Six weeks," he answered, "six weeks from to-morrow and not another hour."

"Wish me good fortune then," said I, "for if this thing comes to the official ear, you are going to be disrated, if not actually fired, and I may be locked up for interfering with the due processes of the Law."

"And richly we shall deserve it," he grunted.

When the good man was gone I retreated into my self-conscious mind, sought a reason for the slender trace of self-satisfaction that was wandering there, and presently discovered it. When found it certainly presented no great support of the confidence expressed before my inspector; but it offered an opportunity for future action and a bare whisper not to abandon all hope. I had demanded six weeks, well knowing that twenty-four hours might settle the matter once for all as far as my own activities in the case were concerned.

The clue, so to call it, was gossamer light; but I cherished the tenuous thing and vowed to myself that it might yet prove a cable stout enough to drag unknown malefactors to justice and reveal the truth concerning their unhappy victim.

For an hour I could not corner the solitary ray resulting from Forbes and his information, for it was through him that it came, though he knew it not. And then the thing flashed upon me and the reason for this faint but persistent hope appeared. Shadowy indeed it limned into being, and it seemed that my sub-conscious mind must have attached more importance to it than I did myself, when the trifle was grasped and laid bare for contemplation. I studied the list of missing persons again, and it was not from the Rev. Jabez Adams that promise came, nor at a glance did the proprietor of a curiosity shop in London readily transform himself into a murdered yachtsman, yet here, after all, was the absurd connecting link—a vague and far-fetched association between John Fleming's dead man and the missing merchant of bric-a-brac.

One had associated the initials on the wallet with its contents, yet that was after all pure assumption. Fleming reported that the leathern pocket-book holding the money had been destroyed and I was not at pains to question him concerning the position of the initials. Yet there could be no doubt that 'L.S.D.' might represent other things beside pounds, shillings and pence. They might even represent in brief the appellation of vanished Mr. Lionel S. Daniel. To imagine a presumably respectable curio dealer as murdered in a yachting suit on Riverton Bay did not occur to me; but the wallet might none the less be his, though one doubted whether it would ever lie in his power to claim it. He had certainly disappeared, and since his disappearance was reported to the police, it followed that information concerning him and his movements would be available.

Hope is a deathless quality and I retired full of it, confident that no sane man would print the symbols for money on his note-holder, certain that the vanished wallet would prove a clue of enormous importance, quite positive that 'L.S.D.' must be the most unusual initials that any man could possess, confident that my luck was holding and that, by way of Mr. Daniel, I should yet pluck the heart from the mystery. The curiosity dealer might, indeed, himself be dead and beyond reach, but if the money should prove to be his, then connecting links must exist within the knowledge of the living to advance me on my way.

These hopes, it is true, receded somewhat when the light of morning shone upon them, for, as we all know, dawn has an unpleasing art to dispel the generous and sanguine proportions of over-night thought before its unsympathetic clarity. Dawn is a cynic and will often do more than one can guess to deter nocturnal resolutions of the noblest quality; but, while chastened after sleep, a sense of substantial progress persisted in remaining with me, nor would the operations of a rested intellect confound it. Once more intuition triumphed over reason and I started for London on the following evening firmly of opinion that the journey was not destined to be fruitless. No sense of personal danger intruded upon my mind, though it had occurred to me that ultimate success could hardly be hoped for without some such element cropping up. But I was pleased to find that the possibility awakened no more emotion—indeed far less—than perusal of a detective story.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. LIONEL DANIEL

Ford Street opened out of Praed Street, and after breakfast at the Great Western Hotel—a meal varied, ample and satisfying as all that pertains to that admirable establishment—I went my way among various unpretentious shops and presently drew up before the premises of the missing man. Their aspect disappointed me, for they presented little sign of prosperity and promised nothing to tempt a serious collector. 'The Old Curiosity Shop' was written in faded gold letters above its portal; but an air of listless indifference clung to the place and the contents of the window also revealed that chill and supine abstraction which inanimate things seem able to assume as easily as ourselves. The tarnished rings, dull silver, cracked china and dusty fragments of jade and ivory; the swords, old medals and snuff-boxes; the violin in its case and all the other weary-looking objects spoke of an establishment foundered and forgotten

—an island of failure preserved only by its own inertia from vanishing in the sea of comparative success that rolled round it.

I neither know nor want to know anything about curios; but my plans were laid, and feeling that a purchase might open the way to that friendship necessary as a basis for information, I studied the window awhile, then entered the shop as a customer. A customer, I argued, must in himself create an atmosphere of surprise and open the door to amity.

A distant bell rang as I entered the shop, but nobody seemed in much hurry to answer it. Within, some old furniture was disposed without much taste, and among the pieces there stood a couple of nearly life-sized, very life-like pottery negroes.

A counter ran at the back of the shop and a woman now emerged from a door behind it. She was tall and had been handsome. Indeed, she lacked not still for comeliness as I saw at nearer approach; but she threatened soon to put on flesh and grow massive after the manner of her race, for the lady was a Jewess. She dressed in black, and her magnificent hair had not been shortened but was simply and finely mounded upon her head. She looked weary and her beautiful dark brown eyes revealed care if not actual sorrow. I raised my hat, bade her good morning, noticed that she wore a wedding-ring and mentioned an object in the shop window.

"You have what looks like a piece of interesting work in your collection, madam," I said. "It is of chased steel and might be a cigar-case. Will you permit me to examine it?"

She appeared unfamiliar with the piece, but I pointed it out and she placed it in my hand. It proved as I thought, a cigar-case of light, beautifully wrought Russian steel, the interior washed with gold. She seemed doubtful as to the price and asked if a guinea would be too much for it. I thought not and, while she was wrapping the treasure up for me, asked a question.

"Pardon me," I begged, "but are you Mrs. Daniels?"

She nodded.

"I ask because the name is familiar. Will you permit me to hope that your husband has safely returned."

She lifted her head and looked at me.

"What d'you know about him?" she inquired.

"Nothing—except that he was reported among the missing. I am a student of these mysterious losses that are from time to time recorded by the police, or through 'broadcasting'. I have nothing to do with the police, you understand, and nothing but praise for their routine work and admirable methods of seeking and often finding missing persons ; but my own manner of setting about such tasks is different."

"Mr. Daniels has not been found," she said. "I am anxious enough to get news of him, naturally ; but if you mean that you are a private inquiry agent wanting a paid job, I cannot help you."

"I am not an agent of any sort," I replied, "I am a retired medical man with a private and personal interest in these cases. My name is Meredith and I reside in Devonshire. Being in London I came to see the residence of Mr. Daniel and marking this interesting curio, hoped to buy it. Do not misunderstand me, or think me rude and inquisitive. You need only say you do not wish me to pursue the subject of your husband's disappearance and I should not dream of doing so. But since he is still undiscovered, if you care for me to apply my methods to the case, I shall be willing to do so. The inquiry would be absolutely private and cost you nothing. This is a hobby of mine ; but I am only concerned that you shall understand that I have no axe to grind and would not for a moment undertake the search if you did not wish it."

She listened with interest and displayed more urbanity in her reply. For a moment she reflected and her dark eyes gazed steadily into mine. Then she spoke.

"Sit down, Dr. Meredith," she said. "Do I understand, sir, that you would try and find my husband—just as a matter of interest to yourself and for no other reason?"

"That is precisely the case," I assured her. "Men have their different pastimes and pre-occupations, and strange as it may seem, mine lies in this direction. I am not a detective or anything of that kind; but the disappearance, without cause or apparent reason, of a fellow creature always appeals to me as a very fascinating challenge. Pursued and investigated it leads to all manner of curious experiences and introduces one to many interesting fellow creatures and human narratives. The police, of course, work by rule of thumb, and often such a rule meets the case and results in success; but if you still remain in doubt as to your husband's welfare, I can only say that here is a mystery I shall be pleased to investigate, solely for the attraction that such a problem presents to me. Absolute privacy is of course essential; but if you do not feel disposed to let me try, you have only got to say so and your wishes would be respected."

I rose to depart and offered my hand.

"In any case I cordially hope you may soon be relieved of your natural anxiety."

"Don't go so quickly," she said. "This is a sort of thing I've no right to turn down, Doctor—for many reasons. There's a lot you'd need to know, of course."

"Everything you could tell me, Mrs. Daniel. Your husband was posted among the missing recently and, of course, I know not how long he may have left you before you were alarmed. Frankly I should want to learn all you and his friends might be able to tell me. But I say again, if reasons exist for reticence, or if you do not care to confide the facts to a stranger, I shall very well understand it."

She was evidently deep in thought and considering my proposition with all her wits. I could see that she approved my attitude and felt disposed to trust me; but an element of disquiet hung behind. Her desire was working for me, while facts unknown to me operated against.

She made a curious remark

"It isn't so much what I know, as what I don't know," she said.

"Doubtless you told the police all you know, Mrs. Daniel?"

For the first time a ray of light passed over her striking face—a smile, engaging but ghostly and swiftly gone.

"There's a lot I should like to tell you, Doctor, but—but I'd be glad to have a talk with a friend first. When you say 'the police', you touch on a difficult side of the question. Mr. Daniel is a man——"

She stopped again and I sought to relieve her embarrassment.

"Look here," I said, "this isn't a moment, in the middle of the morning, to go into what I well understand may be a difficult question. I am stopping at the Great Western Hotel, not ten minutes from here, and if you really would like me to try and find out all about your husband's disappearance, why not come and dine with me and bring your friend? Then we can have a talk; you shall tell me as much or as little as you feel disposed to tell, and after hearing all you may care to say, I will tell you frankly whether you have given me enough material to work upon."

She agreed to this with a reservation.

"That's very kind of you and I feel greatly obliged," she answered. "Not many would put themselves out like that, I'm sure. Leave it this way, Doctor Meredith. If my friend approves, we'll be there sharp at what hour you may please to name; if not, then you'll understand that we think better not. But for my part I'm most grateful—much more than you know. It turns on this, if I may explain. My friend and myself—we are both very anxious indeed to hear what has become of Mr. Daniel; but there's another side—Mr. Daniel's side—and whether he is anxious for us to hear what has become of him, I couldn't tell you."

"You went to the police, however?"

"We did—in a half-hearted sort of way. They've found out nothing anyhow; but—well, we might have helped them more perhaps than what we did."

"I understand, I think. It is purely a question of trust. You mustn't be half-hearted with me, because I shall know it at once if you are."

"If we come, we won't be half-hearted," she promised. "We felt a thought nervous—for one thing and another; but we're not nervous now. We can face the best or the worst as the case may be."

"Come at eight o'clock if that's an hour to suit your convenience."

"If we're not in the lounge at the hotel five minutes before eight, we won't be coming; but I think we'll come."

We parted. No customer had interrupted our conference and indeed the Old Curiosity Shop did not suggest customers. Stagnation homed within it and its aspect had already inspired me to various reflections and even theories. They had been supported by the vague emotions of the lady. Her interests were evidently not in the business, and for my part I began already to doubt the existence of any business at all. It occurred to me that the vanished Lionel Daniel might be a 'fence', and that his own doubtful reputation would probably prove the reason of his wife's half-hearted approach to the police. Upon the whole I felt every reason to believe myself on the right track. Gulfs of mystery remained to be crossed before it was possible to prove the dead man had existed as the spouse of this attractive woman; but already I found myself assuming the fact, and the indication that he might be an unsatisfactory personage went still further to establish my hopes. Unsatisfactory people are wont to meet with sudden death far more often than satisfactory ones, for there continues to be a strong human tendency to revenge, oftenest manifest when the Law is tardy to punish, or the task of adequate rataliation is blocked by the Law itself. Where Law hangs back, Judge Lynch has often outstripped it. Thus my imagination ran on and I permitted myself a measure of satisfaction that had doubtless driven Newton Forbes to utterance of most scathing disparagement. I pulled myself together and almost wished he were at my elbow to snub me.

The day was long and I killed the morning with a visit to the Zoological Gardens and inspection of certain new serpents and a rare lemur. Him I only saw darkly for, nocturnal fellow that he is, he declined to reveal anything but a slumbering back. In the afternoon I visited one of my very few friends, an eminent authority on forensic medicine, and over my tea, in the comfortable smoking room of the 'Great Western', I considered the amenities of the House of Commons and read the interchanges between a past and present Chancellor. Neither shone conspicuously and one realised how much of feminine nature may be concealed in the mental processes of the doctrinaire. Income Tax and Death Duties are a standing confutation of statesmanship, and brought to this acid test we see how terribly England needs first class intellect combined with honesty. At present the votes of the many can only be purchased with the money of the few. So the money is stolen, since no element of abstract justice weights the calculations of a paid politician. Consider the ethics of treating married couples as one person for purpose of Sur-tax and as two for Death Duties! I resolved to spring these abominations on Forbes when next we met and learn his views, for if I, a bachelor, could see the disgrace, he as a married man might be counted to feel it also. But the world is full of married men and apparently they do nothing but whine about it, instead of getting together and fighting. One blushes for our supine middle-classes for ever dead to their own power and lacking the nerve and courage to combine and exercise it.

At ten minutes to eight o'clock I entered the lounge of the hotel, having ordered a satisfactory dinner for three, and at five minutes before the hour Mrs. Daniel and her friend arrived. Somewhat to my surprise he proved to be a man—obviously a Jew, but of good presence and refined bearing. They made rather a striking couple, for the lady was handsomely attired and artificial light suited her fading good looks better than the day.

Mrs. Daniel introduced her companion as 'Mr. David Goldberg', and I noted that the gentleman, behind an affable manner, took careful stock of me from the first. In his company the woman cheered up and it was evident that a close friendship obtained between them. She felt content to let him do most of the talking, and although we did not touch on the matter in our thoughts until the meal was ended and we had retired to the smoking-room, even during dinner Mr. Goldberg monopolised the conversation while we discussed general subjects. He asked many questions, but with courtesy.

In the smoking-room, Mrs. Daniel accepted a cigarette but declined a liqueur, while the man joined me in a cigar. When coffee was served and we had a quiet corner to ourselves, Mrs. Daniel invited Goldberg to talk and he began to do so at once.

"We are going to be perfectly frank with you, Doctor, and first we thank you very cordially for offering us the advantage of your services. The police have failed after a search which I regard as perfunctory in the extreme ; but they have a theory and their theory is not going to be influenced by Mrs. Daniel. As you may know, once let them get a theory and it is beyond the power of laymen to change it. They hold that Mr. Daniel has left England for his own purposes and may or may not return. We can see nothing to support such an opinion, except that Mr. Daniel's affairs are in order. But his wife's relations with him have never been openly unfriendly, and while he has always chosen to keep his affairs to himself and she really knows very little about them outside the business of the shop, yet this we know : that his money never came from the shop, because he lived on lines the very modest revenues of the Ford Street establishment did not justify. The shop he inherited from his father—so he always declared. It was the home to which he brought his wife after they were married. Daniel was secretive and, in the conventional phrase, lived more or less a double life. He was often away from home for a week or two, but never invited Mrs. Daniel to share his excursions, or offered any particulars concerning them. That he made money and engaged in lucrative business, there can be no doubt. He was a man of very pleasing manners and moved, I rather think, in a different social scale behind the scenes from that you would associate with a small shopkeeper. He had plenty of prosperous friends, but he kept them to himself. Yet one cannot say that he was unkind to Mrs. Daniel."

"She did not share his social round?"

"From choice," answered the lady. "I am a very quiet woman and like a quiet life. I never cared for gaiety and the pleasures that Lionel best enjoyed. He must not be blamed there. I might have seen much more life if I had wished to do so, but I shrank from it and he knew that the quiet existence I lived was agreeable to me."

"That is so. Nevertheless," continued Goldberg, "there arose many features of their united life to give Mrs. Daniel pain. I may be talking of the living or the dead, but I am only concerned with truth and I say that while 'kind', as Mrs. Daniel admits, to the extent of keeping his wife in funds, and never interfering with her own quiet manner of spending time, he was an unfaithful and bad husband. She had long become a cipher in his own existence. She was outside it, and for all that she needed of friendship and understanding she had to seek elsewhere. She kept his home together, he paid her with money for her patience and loyalty; but she had long ceased to be anything but a convenience and was in reality no more than a housekeeper. His interests and amusements did not embrace his wife."

"I thoroughly understand, Mr. Goldberg. He was, you say, in the habit of leaving his home for unknown destinations and unknown periods. Now, tell me why, on this particular occasion, Mrs. Daniel grew anxious and sought the police."

"Because his absence was so protracted. I will give you the exact particulars of what occurred. Daniel announced one of his periodic departures and told Mrs. Daniel that he would be away for a fortnight and that she might expect a cheque for one hundred pounds in the course of the next twenty-four hours. That was quite usual. He generally specified the length of his excursions and sent Mrs. Daniel a cheque to tide over the time. She had no bank account herself, and depended entirely upon him for supplies. There was never any difficulty about money. Her needs were few and he often pressed cash upon her, though he never made her a present.

"On this occasion, however, the usual cheque did not arrive and no news whatever of Daniel reached her. She mentioned her uneasiness to her most intimate friends, my sister and myself, and as time went on, and her husband gave no sign, but exceeded the length of his promised departure by weeks, she became anxious. I made inquiries but could learn nothing of him from our few common acquaintances; and then Mrs. Daniel took my advice and put the matter into the hands of the police. She hesitated, fearing the step might be disagreeable to the vanished man; but, feeling very suspicious and troubled on her account, I prevailed with her to act. She much hoped that the mere public announcement that she was seeking him, might bring him home when he heard of it; but, as you know, nothing transpired."

"He must have been a business man," I suggested. "Is there nobody who might be supposed to have closer knowledge of his affairs than Mrs. Daniel?"

"Probably a good many," answered Goldberg with scorn. "Few knew less about him than she. Yes, Miriam——" he turned to the lady. "There is very little doubt of that; but the point is that we know nothing about who they may be. For my part I firmly believe that people exist who could probably tell us all we want to know; but how to reach them. Examination of his affairs reveals no business. A lawyer, more or less in his confidence, and my own systematic inquiries produce nothing."

"That seems very extraordinary," I said.

"On the face of it, yes; but the police are probably right there. They believe that when he left his home from time to time and entered another sphere of which we know nothing, Mr. Daniel probably changed his name. You see how that complicates the search and prevents any approach to his bank manager."

"I do indeed; but such problems only increase my personal interest."

"You don't feel it impossible, Doctor?" asked Miriam Daniel. Then she proceeded. "Let me talk a little now, David. I feel that my husband is, in reality, two men, and the larger and fuller life he leads is the one I do not share. I have often puzzled to know why he wanted me and kept on our quiet little, uneventful shop. We were happy enough in the past. We have been married ten years ; but he is a man of extraordinary energy and has probably felt that I am growing old, while he continues young and active. I loved him once and he loved me ; but I do not love him now that he puts other women before me ; and, as he does that, it is certain that he does not love me. I say again he was always kind and nothing annoyed him unless I showed sorrow. He hated me to be sorrowful—seemed to resent it. He had many enterprises and made it clear when they had failed by fits of bad temper ; but he never told me of his interests, or let me share in anything that mattered. He did not care twopence for curios or old things ; but he loved precious stones in a curious, unmeaning fashion."

She stopped suddenly.

"Did he ever make you a present of a valuable gem ?" I asked, and she shook her head.

"Tell me now your own theories," I begged. "I should much like to know, before we proceed to such intimate details of Mr. Daniel as you can furnish, what you and Mr. Goldberg suspect was the course of events."

The man was about to speak, but hesitated and lifted his eyes to the woman. It was easy to see by every inflection of his voice that he adored her.

"Myself," she said, "I believe that Lionel has left me for good. I think, also, that he has probably left England for good. It seems a cruel and heartless thing to say, but that is my belief now. His estate, I understand, would be mine, and at first I felt that, owing to one circumstance of the first importance, Lionel had not in reality done me a cruel and heartless turn. I even felt that consideration for me had perhaps guided his actions. He has three thousand pounds at the bank which we know about and has not claimed any of that, so he knew, if he did not reappear, I should be beyond reach of want. But since he has not sent me any clear indication that he has gone for good, or proof that I may legally divorce him, I feel my theory may be all wrong, and the one circumstance that I felt supported it cannot have weighed with him."

"He is hanging over you still—rather a dark shadow?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"And what was this all-important circumstance that might have indicated a kinder course?"

She was silent a moment and then, looking at Goldberg:

"He knew me and he knew David," she said quietly. "He knew that we were a man and woman of scrupulous honour and honesty. He knew by my faithfulness to my religion and home-training, by my love for my parents and by every instinct I possess, that he had nothing to fear or suspect. He knew that David was a man of highest honour, with ideals very different from his own; but he also knew that David loved me with deep devotion and would marry me to-morrow were he free to do so."

"Given, then, no cause for the man to cease respecting you, it seems unthinkable, if he wanted to be free himself, that he should not also free you, Mrs. Daniel. And that is a reflection which may prove of great value to me. What does Mr. Goldberg think?"

"I will not mince words," he answered, "because we are now getting to the root of the matter. I despised Daniel for a man of base conduct and unworthy ambitions. I hated him for treating Miriam as he did treat her; but I understood it, because the revelation of his real self must have probably parted her from him for ever. She knew by a thousand signs he was too cynical to conceal that she had lost his love—so to call it—but of his other life—lived as I am positive, under another name—she knew nothing; nor would she do what I desired her to do: set a watch on him and discover particulars of his secret life. Now, of course, it may be too late to do any such thing, or learn under what other name he may still be flourishing. But this much I will say : I honestly believe that if it had been in his power to do so, and he had meant to leave her for good, the man would have taken legal steps to liberate Miriam, or given her the power to liberate herself. Two things might have prevented him, and only two. If, by indicating to her where he was, he might have done an action inconvenient to himself and his plans, he was far too selfish to have troubled about it ; but obviously he could easily have done that much without hurting himself. Therefore I rule that out. The alternative is obvious : he was not in a position to free her, or let her know what had become of him. Failing either course, he may yet return."

I nodded and turned to Mr. Goldberg.

"I appreciate this courageous plain speaking to a stranger ; but it was more than wise, for you strengthen my hand, and the fact that it may lie in my power, if successful, to add to the happiness of both of you is a genuine incentive. You have told me much that it was vital I should know, and now I will tell you something. We must not mince words, as you truly say, and from what I have already learned I feel this : that in all probability Mr. Daniel is either dead, or prevented by unknown circumstances from communicating with his wife. It is hard to imagine the circumstances that would so prevent him. In real life people are not kidnapped and locked up and kept alive indefinitely; but in real life they may destroy themselves, or be destroyed. He was clearly not the man to destroy himself; but from your general impressions, I should judge that he might have come to a secret end—for reasons connected with the unknown life he lived."

"Then it is hopeless," said Mrs. Daniel quietly. "It is hopeless, David, because you have told me that leave to presume death must be a matter of many years."

"That depends upon circumstances," I explained, "but it is too soon to assume failure. To find a dead man might prove no more difficult than to discover a live one, and I am far from regarding the task as hopeless. If Mr. Daniel has vanished from his old environment, there must be many in it aware of the fact. We have, however, to find that environment. The problem is first to learn under what name he lived and conducted his affairs; and probably, when I have achieved that task, the truth about him will be swiftly reached."

I spoke with a confidence which had been ridiculous in reality. But, of course, I knew infinitely more about the facts than either of them, and their intense desire to believe me inspired a trust that reason must have instantly dispelled. They were however, in love, and even elderly lovers clutch at any shadow. They took hope from my sanguine attitude to the prodigious task before me and did not stop to ask themselves what possible means might lie open by which a stranger was about to pursue such an inquiry. Instead they tried to assist me.

"He used to go a great deal to night clubs and such places," said Goldberg, "and once find out what he calls himself, you might certainly get a light on him. But I believe, unless you have private friends, that you cannot go to the liveliest of these places. You need introductions. Only the police are free."

"You never heard him mention a club being raided, or anything of that sort, when he was in it?" I asked.

"No," answered the man, "nor any of the names of the places he went to."

"And what is your business, if I may ask? I must keep in touch with you."

"I am a jeweller and work for Messrs. Warwick and Mayhew of Bond Street," he answered.

"He is a very great expert in precious stones and travels for his firm," explained Mrs. Daniel. "It was over precious stones he became acquainted with my husband."

"I handled several for him—all quite authentic and from reputable sources," added Goldberg. "In those days I liked him and admired his wit and activity. I only knew him, of course, as 'Mr. Daniel' and our families became acquainted, for we found we had common friends of our nationality."

The hour was growing late and, after further inquiries and answers on a dozen minor points, I asked the one question necessary to convince me that I now knew the dead man buried at Daleham.

"We must meet again once before I start on this most interesting inquiry," I said. "But you will be wanting to go home, Mrs. Daniel, and I must keep you up no longer. Upon a solitary point, however, you can give me information: the personal, physical aspect of your husband. I will speak of him firmly as 'your late husband', for such I believe him to be and, facts being as you have related, that must bring you no undue grief."

She was moved, none the less, at this blunt assertion, though I could see her opinion of my prescience was such that she believed it.

"Tell the doctor, David," she said. Then she rose to get her wraps before leaving me.

Goldberg, glad at her departure, spoke swiftly.

"Daniel is a tall, spare man of commonplace appearance," he declared. "He exuded energy and what women call 'charm'. He has cultivated the manners of the better class and poses, quite successfully, as a gentleman—full of tact and restraint and all that sort of thing. He has the art to suggest a heart he never possessed in reality. He will listen to bores and sympathise with bad luck and take infinite trouble to suggest a humanity and goodwill he never felt, or could feel, for anybody on earth. An accomplished humbug with a heart of flint—that's what he is. A knave in fact, and I hope, as you appear to suspect, that he is dead. I hope it with all my heart; but if he has met cleverer and more remorseless people than himself, of course they may have the skill and the means to keep his death a secret."

"It is very hard to blot out a fellow creature and leave no clue," I answered. "Tell me a little more touching his physical aspect. Does he suffer from any ailment? Did he ever have an accident? Can you think of any distinctive marks or peculiarity?"

"He used to get gout," said the jeweller. "He said it was hereditary; but I doubt it. He had fits of gout in his feet through which his wife nursed him faithfully enough—the results of his own excesses probably."

"Authentic gout? You know for certain?

People often say they have gout when they suffer a twinge of rheumatism. Real gout is becoming a rare disease."

"It made him lame and the remedies made him very bad-tempered. It was gout all right—so the doctor told Miriam."

The lady returned at this moment and Goldberg left with her five minutes later. On second thoughts I told them that there existed no immediate need to meet again until my inquiries had been pursued awhile. I gave them my address at Daleham and begged them to communicate with me should any information reach them.

"You shall hear instantly when a ray of light is thrown upon the problem," I promised, "and much I hope it may be my good fortune to relieve your anxieties in a satisfactory manner. You have my hearty sympathy and have wakened my interest."

Mrs. Daniel again expressed her surprise and gratitude at my altruistic conduct, while the man echoed her. They evidently trusted me and I felt gratification that an adventure, hitherto undertaken for its academic interest alone, might presently result in advantage to simple people whom it would be a pleasure to serve. Especially I liked the wife, for she was gracious and kindly—a woman of fine nature who had not enjoyed the best of fortune.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HON. NEVILLE ARCHER

On my way back to Devonshire I analysed my new information and perceived how fate continued to simplify a problem that might easily have proved beyond professional skill. Nothing but friendly chance continued to attend me at every step and I felt a fatalistic trust that it would not desert me, but lead to the murderers, as it had led to the secret of the dead man's identity. There was no longer a shadow of doubt that Mr. Lionel S. Daniel had come to his end in the near neighbourhood of Riverton, and since that was the only yachting centre on the Bay, one assumed he must have made his final cruise from there. I had gleaned exact dates, and it was clear that three days after he left the 'Old Curiosity Shop', John Fleming had found his corpse. Here, then, lay the starting point for my future industry, and I began by striving to imagine the dead man's progress after he departed from home for the last time.

Mrs. Daniel was able to tell me that he had taken a kit-bag only. He was clad in a lounge suit of serge, and it seemed probable that he had started to join some yachting party, his nautical attire being in the kit-bag. He always looked after his clothes himself and his wife could throw no light on what he took away with him. Needless to say I had not indicated by so much as a question my special interest in this point, for it was no part of my purpose at present to impart private knowledge to these people.

To Newton Forbes, however, I did relate events on the following evening, yet tantalized the good man and pulled his leg a little before doing so.

He expressed surprise at my speedy return and wondered why I had abandoned the hunt so swiftly.

"If only to save your face," said he, "I should have thought you might have put up a better fight."

"Drink your whiskey," I answered, "and consider fiscal questions, the impact of Income Tax and its increasingly terrible inducements to evasion. Who, for example, shall say how many young couples of wage-earners find that the tax penalties on marriage are robbery and, for that reason, evade the right, while enjoying its privileges? Income Tax is deliberately levelled at destruction of the fittest. Income Tax——"

"You've failed," interrupted Forbes, "and are starting a favourite red herring of mine to make me forget the fact."

"No, old lad," I responded. "Failure is not a word you shall fling at me. I have not failed, because only an idiot, or a professional detective, trained on hide-bound and archaic principles, could possibly have failed. So far I continue to let you into my procedure, hoping to find in you a staunch supporter of the theories I am out to establish. Therefore it is going to be your delight to hear that I have succeeded. Another step to the ultimate discovery has been made; and it required nothing but common sense to make it."

"There's a catch in this, Doctor," declared the inspector. "It's growing to be my fixed opinion you murdered that man yourself."

"Just an opinion the morbid mind of a bewildered policeman might be expected to advance," I replied. "No, Newton, I did not kill him and, for the moment, I am not in a position to tell you who did; but the first step to the assassin was to learn exactly whom he had slain. That you will admit. One fits the murdered to the murderer. That, of course, with the assistance of the spade-work of the police, I was easily able to do, though they themselves were not."

"You claim that you have found who the dead man was?"

"Certainly. That is why I went to London. You presented me with the needful data, though alas ! unable to note its significance."

"Bluff," said Forbes ; and then I explained how the initials on the dead man's wallet had given me my line of inquiry and pretended it was child's play.

"Beginner's luck," said my friend. "It's stupendous ! I never heard anything like it. It sounds utterly mad."

"To your trained intelligence it doubtless would," I replied ; "but such things do not in reality happen by chance. The untrained, normal sagacity of the police was responsible."

I told him the full story and concluded in this manner.

"The real name of the dead we now know ; but that is not at all likely to be the name under which he lost his life. His wife and her friend have a sound theory that he was two people rolled into one. The simple Goldberg might have satisfied himself on the point, yet never did so, nor would Mrs. Daniel institute any secret inquiry, being the sort of worthy and straightforward creature who could not condescend to such a course. But I am disposed to think they are right. Daniel probably lived and died as somebody else ; therefore the next step in my case will not be to find people living under the impression they killed Daniel, but somebody quite different—still as unknown to us as Mr. Daniel was to them. Does that strike you as good reasoning?"

"It strikes me that your run of good luck has petered out. And high time it did," replied the grudging man. "For if the murderers don't know they have killed Daniel, but imagined they killed Smith, Jones, or Robinson, then you've got to begin all over again. And that, in my opinion, is where the professional police, as represented by Scotland Yard, ought to come in."

"My achievements are making you jealous," I told him, "yet you should be proud of me rather than grudging. Have you not always suspected that I hid my light under a bushel; and now, when it blazes out to support your contention, you want to extinguish it. Emphatically this is not yet a case for the police, and you know it is not. The police had their chance to discover the vanished Daniel; but who was it that did so? I should have thought that here a little generous and genuine applause came in. I am chilled and disheartened and can only fear that the success of my methods has wakened a mean spirit of envy not to have been expected in you."

"Don't rot," he replied. "Things have tumbled into your lap, and when you talk about 'your methods', you talk nonsense. But, as I said before, now that it may come to the actual criminal and the actual crime, the case is altered."

"Not in the least. Why should it be more difficult to find the murderer than prove the murder? I found Fleming under a false name, then why not Daniel? You forget the interesting things I have already done without any fuss or limelight. Let me remind you where we stand. I find a dead man supposed to be A. I show you that he is not A, but B. I actually discover the truth of B. I prove that B. was not the lad to destroy himself; but quite the contrary. I gather further that B. didn't die as B. but as X.—an unknown quantity as yet. He died as X. I now set out to discover X. Given X., I shall proceed to ascertain who among his acquaintance destroyed him. Why would you make me faint-hearted at such a critical moment and deny me the fruits of my industry and acumen? Why, in the light of my record, should you instantly assume that because I prove a murder, only Scotland Yard can find the criminals? No, no, my friend, you really must not intervene at this interesting juncture."

"What can you do single-handed?" he asked. "At this point it is obvious we need skilled professional inquirers, armed with authority, who alone would have the power to get on with it. Consider the size of the task and what it entails. Are you going to haunt night-clubs and make friends with the sort of people this man apparently companioned? In any case the challenge is one of extraordinary difficulty and it would be interesting to know what you consider your next move."

"You said all that before," I reminded him. "The point is not my next move, but whether I shall be permitted to make it. If you had the heart to take this engaging pursuit away from me, I should evince no further concern in it and wash my hands of the whole matter. You must give me your promise, Newton, that you will not lift a finger—otherwise I have finished. You laugh at my 'methods'; but it will be time to laugh at them when they have failed. I am disappointed in you. Your attitude——"

"All right, all right," he said. "I never know if you are serious, or trying to get a rise out of me. My only purpose was to help, not hinder, and I thought that you might like to feel the moral support of the Yard behind you."

"Not in the least," I told him. "Secrecy has proved my strong suit so far, and I wish to proceed in this subterranean fashion and shrink from the light of publicity until I have reached the point when my part ceases and the police must do theirs. I have by no means reached that point. You think I shan't reach it; I am not at all prepared to agree with you. Of one thing be sure: if and when I find the particular den of lions from which this Daniel failed to emerge intact, I shall be very careful—first of my own skin, then of the rights and duties of the Force."

"I hope so. My feeling is that you are so ingenuous and have enjoyed such phenomenal luck that you may go ambling on until you get into the lion's den yourself and only cry out for us when it may be too late."

"That is very cunning of you," I said; "but if I am ingenuous, then, beloved Newton, you are the reverse, for if there is one thing you know about me it is my uncanny instinct for self-preservation. You remarked upon it a hundred times in the War."

"You had an uncanny instinct for preserving other people," he was generous enough to say. "I'll give you that credit. You're warned and ignore the warning, so I can do no more than leave you to your fate. It's understood that still I hold off; so now what are you going to do next?"

"I am not going to night clubs," I assured him, "or to seek to enter the haunts wherein 'L.S.D.' flourished. We have got certain facts and, on the strength of them, my next step will be taken. Given facts, my detective instinct says 'Exhaust them; collate them; interpret them to the uttermost before proceeding to theories'. We do not know that Daniel haunted night clubs. Mrs. Daniel and Mr. Goldberg think he did and it is quite possible, but not certain. I am only concerned with what we absolutely know.

"We know that he left London on a certain date in a serge suit of landsman's cut and was found dead three days later in a yachtsman's clothes two miles from Daleham. We may assume that the yachting outfit was in his kit-bag and that he donned it, either before or after going aboard a yacht. He might have boarded a yacht at fifty ports and been deposited in Riverton Bay after a cruise from somewhere else; but, on the other hand, I think it far more likely that he joined up at Riverton. Let us imagine him as setting out from London that morning and arriving in due course at the famous yachting centre. He may have simply come to see certain associates and chosen to dress the part, or he may have been bound for a yachting cruise. Now I attach enormous importance to two facts: the large sum of money found on Daniel and the still more significant point that nobody ever reported his death. On these two certainties I have built a ghostly if not ghastly theory, which I am not going to tell you at present, but which will guide my operations to-morrow. One fact puzzles me utterly: that the money was upon him. I should have expected that those responsible for his destruction would have known of its existence and been exceedingly careful to remove it; yet it is most fortunate for my theory that it was there, because, without it, I should have no theory at all. Facts, however, tend to support my suspicion, and the upshot is that I go no further than Riverton to-morrow in hope to pick up some belated information concerning the dead man. That's all I can say yet. What I am going to do I shan't tell you till I've done it; but my operations will be based on the assumption that Daniel came by train to Riverton and that, in all probability, he was a dead man a very few hours afterwards."

"That's likely enough and I'm with you," admitted Forbes. "But the money beats me too. You'd have thought the poisoners must have been at some trouble to clear his pockets. You believe that they knew Daniel as somebody else, and assuming they had ample leisure to hide their traces, they would have left nothing on the dead man to identify him. His diamond ring and watch were thrown into the sea—not by the murderers, but by John Fleming—always assuming that Fleming didn't murder him."

"Fleming is innocent" I answered; "but you raise a very important and mysterious issue. For what on earth would have been easier than to sink Daniel in deep water and hide him for ever? Given a yacht, why do we find him stranded ashore not two miles from Riverton? He may never have gone to sea at all. Probably he didn't."

Forbes shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I wish to God you'd let me report to the Yard and have done with it," he said.

"A week is all I demand," I promised him. "If I fail in a week, I fail. I'll go further, for such is my instinct in the matter that I'll promise this. If I unearth nothing at Riverton, I'll throw up the sponge. I don't waste hours of my life haunting night clubs for a hundred dead Daniels. My interest is now reduced to finding those who killed him—not so much for their own sakes as for the sake of Mrs. Daniel and the excellent Goldberg. Whether we succeed or do not, I shan't leave them in doubt of his death; and from all I heard it is quite certain they will not be in the least overwhelmed to learn of it."

"They may have much more light to throw," declared Forbes.

"They may; but I will first employ the light already in me before seeking any more. Be hopeful, Newton, and if you get a brain wave before nine o'clock to-morrow, send a messenger, and I will wait upon you."

But I heard nothing from Forbes next morning, and repaired in an early train to Riverton, there to pursue a systematic search.

"I have," I told myself, "a sort of shadow theory based on facts; but the more correctly I have read the facts, the more likely is my theory to take me a step forward."

Details that seem not of vital importance at the beginning of an inquiry may, during the passage of events, suddenly increase tenfold in their value, and a point mentioned by Miriam Daniel had recurred and gone far to affirm my next move. Her husband had promised to send her money during his absence. This he had often done and always kept his word until now. It seemed clear, therefore, that he had gone to collect money, but probably been prevented by death from despatching the promised sum to his wife. The money, I argued, had been gathered in at Riverton, and his yachtsman's costume seemed to indicate that he had gone afloat to collect it. His wife had assured me that he dressed very well and appropriately for all occasions, and in any case to visit a yacht in a yachting outfit might have caused less attention than had he arrived in landsman's garb.

I considered Daniel's probable course of action. Always assuming that he had gone to Riverton, he might have either visited, or permanently joined, some yacht that night, or waited until the morning before doing so. He had probably come by appointment and been expected. This, however, was but a surmise, and it appeared equally possible that his visit had been intended as a surprise. I debated the more likely alternative and decided that he must have come by appointment and with due warning. It seemed unlikely that somebody afloat would have this large sum by him in notes. He was expected, then; but I could not believe that the people who expected him were responsible for his death—otherwise they had hardly left his well-stored wallet intact.

Murder is usually a nocturnal business and I decided that the deed had been done afloat and after dark. Daniel might have lost his life on the night of arrival and certainly not later than the next night. His plans it was impossible to learn, but my theory pointed to the probability that he had come for money and only money. Having received the money, he had most likely designed to return to shore at once if free to do so. In this intention he was apparently frustrated. He might, of course, have never gone to sea at all—at any rate while alive, and other objections to my present theory were quite ready to present themselves; but for the moment I chose to over-rule them, being confident of my deductions from the facts, of which the most important was Mr. Daniel's character.

He had in any case changed his clothes, and to do so must have gone somewhere on his arrival. What in that case could have happened? He would have sought an inn or hotel, explained his need and either engaged an apartment for an hour, or for longer if he meant coming ashore again. Assuming that he had boarded some boat in the harbour that night, he might have decided to stop in Riverton until the following morning, or he might, of course, have proposed to catch the midnight mail for London. He was, however, not returning home at once, or his wife would not have been promised a letter containing money. Still, assuming that he had come on business, and not as an invited guest for pleasure, he would have returned to his hotel and resumed his lounge suit when his work was done and his money collected.

If that were so, there must be a lounge suit and a kit-bag in Riverton unaccounted for, or else those responsible for Daniel's destruction, being aware of such a clue, had taken pains to collect his luggage with some natural excuse for doing so. I imagined that he might have had the key of his apartment with him and that his secret enemies had learned his movements ashore and possessed themselves of it after they poisoned him.

In any case such an incident would not have escaped the memory of the people at his place of call, and I now set out upon the long and wearisome task of ascertaining whether my guess at the dead man's movements might prove to possess any foundation in fact. There are probably more than a hundred houses where a man might put up for a night at Riverton, but my knowledge of Daniel led me to assume that no mean establishment was likely to attract him. I set to work on the big hotels, therefore, and eliminated ten before luncheon. My inquiry concerned a definite date and utmost courtesy greeted it; but there were few entries for that particular evening in the arrival registers which afforded interest, and the few concerning which it was worth while making inquiry proved fruitless. Not until I had lunched at the Royal Riverton Bay Hotel and, after a pleasant meal, raised my question, did the desired clue appear; and then, to my satisfaction, something definite was reaped—information of the first importance promising news still more vital.

My good fortune persisted through one more phase, and I remembered Forbes—his assurance that beginners have all the luck, and his equally firm conviction that mine might now be assumed to have petered out.

The visitors' book was placed at my disposal and I learned that five people had arrived at the Royal Riverton Hotel by their motor omnibus on the evening in question from London. They comprised a man and his wife, two sisters, and a single gentleman. He only was unexpected and, concerning him, the clerk in the bureau had interesting facts to tell me.

He had signed under the name of 'The Hon. Neville Archer of London' and he had engaged a double-bedded room, explaining that his wife was joining him on the following day. He had dined in his morning clothes, then changed into yachting attire and asserted that he was about to visit friends on board a yacht in the harbour, but would return before midnight. He had not been seen again; but the first postal delivery had brought a card for him. It merely recorded that 'B' would arrive by the mail and expect him at the station. During that afternoon a lady had duly appeared and inquired for 'Mr. Archer', only to learn that his whereabouts were unknown. She was exceedingly vague and apparently unable to throw any light whatever on this situation. Her ignorance appeared genuine enough in the opinion of the hotel manager, whom I questioned on the subject; but he summed the situation with probable correctness, as a man versed in the sordid romances that hover about any large hotel.

"I don't think the lady knew much about him except that he was going to give her a good time," he said. "She was more angry than troubled. Just the usual game no doubt, and something had happened to spoil it. But it must have been something a bit out of the common, because 'The Honourable Archer'—so to call him—never turned up again. It was no use bullying the woman, of course, and she left the same night by the London express. We mentioned the matter to the police and they overhauled the man's luggage, but could find nothing there—not a clue of any sort. They inquired for him at the harbour also, but there was nobody unaccounted for and no accident reported. In London the name of the Hon. Neville Archer couldn't be traced, and that was that."

"Describe him if you will be so good," I begged; but the manager had never seen him. A waiter and the booking clerk were able, however, to give a description which came near enough to my ideal portrait of the missing man.

It was at the harbour I learned more and received the first genuine surprise since my investigation started.

I argued that if Daniel had visited a yacht, he must have taken a boat to do so, and while many might have gone and come upon the evening in question and been apparently accounted for to the satisfaction of the police, from the angle of my superior knowledge any incident of that sort, though apparently unimportant, would lead to results.

The matter was now many weeks old, yet since there had been a police inquiry, it might still remain in the memory of the boatmen who thronged the harbour.

At this season Riverton Bay is visited by the sprat, and on a clear night are seen many lights flashing through the darkness, where men toil at the seines.

I strolled among a dozen longshore lads and entered into conversation with them, talking first of the sprat harvest and sharing their regret at learning it was not good. We drifted to another side of their business and the summer holidays, the regattas and varied attractions of this great 'resort'.

Thus we came to the vanished man, and most of them remembered the incident and had theories concerning it. They judged that he had disappeared for his own reasons. Their memories were good and several could recollect conveying yachtsmen to and from the craft in the inner harbour on that night; while others had pulled out to vessels lying in the Bay. Among these an elderly man spoke with assurance that he had actually served the subject of the future search. He was called Borlase and persisted in his opinion, though the police had attached no importance to it.

"I guess I'm right, because the gentleman corresponded so close to the description of the one they lost," he told me. "Everything was straight and above-board you understand, and you can be sure he came ashore again, though he never went back to the hotel. But I'd bet a dollar it was him."

"Tell me your experience," I asked. "I'm rather interested in that man and should like to hear what happened. You may, of course, be right in your opinion. He was tall, dark, clad in yachting clothes and is said to have had a pleasing and courteous manner—an agreeable man. Come and have a drink."

Borlase abandoned the net he was mending and joined me at a waterside inn some fifty yards distant.

"He was all that," he agreed. "A pleasant-mannered gentleman and used to be waited on seemingly. There was a steam yacht anchored half a mile outside the harbour heads and he wanted to go out to her. It was a quiet night with just a ground swell from the storm twenty-four hours before. Starry and clear and quiet, but no moon. The best of the season was over, but a good bit was still doing. I rowed the gentleman out to his order and, when we got alongside of her, he bade me return for him round about eleven o'clock. 'Don't be later', he said, and those were his very words."

Borlase stopped, drank the glass of beer he had ordered, and proceeded while a second glass was drawn.

" 'Very good, Sir—eleven sharp', I said and paddled back to harbour. It was a bit after nine o'clock when I got him to the yacht."

"Now break off a moment and tell me what you remember of the man," I said.

"Nought to name beyond the general idea."

"Had he a watch-chain or jewellery on his hands, or anything that stuck in your memory?"

But Borlase could furnish no details.

"I can't call home nothing. The police asked for details when I mentioned my job to them; but they thought no more of it when I told them the rest of the business."

"That was?"

"At fifteen to eleven I went out for my gentleman and, on reaching the yacht, a sailor ran down to tell me he'd gone ashore earlier than he meant and had been took back by one of the yacht's own boats. The chap handed me five bob, and I went back and thought no more of the matter till next day and the inquiry. The big yacht was still there and the police went aboard and asked after the visitor; but they was told the same as me—that he'd been put ashore—and thought no more of it. But I'll lay my life he was the missing man, though nobody else don't think so. The police had what they thought was a hotter clue; but nothing came of it so far as I heard tell."

"Surely the people on the yacht knew something about the man?"

"No. They asked Sir Max Fordham himself. He was leaving the yacht with his party next day; but he said that the chap was only a chance acquaintance he'd met down south somewhere, who had seen his boat was there and dropped in for a drink."

"The 'Mignonette'?" I inquired, with some secret emotion.

"Her. She was here for a few days after the owner left. She'd just come up from a cruise in the Mediterranean. A masterpiece she is—one of the biggest English-owned steam-yachts in the world I've heard."

We had another drink and I thanked Mr. Borlase for his information, but declared my opinion that he was probably mistaken, and departed to review the fresh material. One paramount question demanded first to be answered. It was, of course, exceedingly probable that the nocturnal visitor to the 'Mignonette' had nothing to do with Mr. Daniel, or 'The Honourable Neville Archer'; but that was capable of proof. Before all else I now required to know who had visited the yacht. The police must surely have been informed and the fact that they were satisfied might have satisfied me; but though I denied it to him, the conviction that Borlase was correct animated my mind and, after considering an approach to the local authority, I determined on another and more exciting course. Always recollecting Mr. Daniel's wallet, and not forgetting the wealth of the owner of the 'Mignonette', I found myself associating the two ideas and determined to proceed accordingly.

CHAPTER IX

A CHAT WITH SIR MAX

Once again I bewildered Newton Forbes with a new narrative and he was slightly more generous of applause than usual.

"It's like the instalments of a yarn," he said; "but I wish I felt as sure we were going to get to the bottom of it as one does with the invented mysteries. I should say there was no manner of doubt you've found Daniel and I will give you a pat on the back for a mighty smart deduction—a great piece of pure detective work along classical lines—worthy of any detective-inspector on the roll; but the mischief is that one can't see an inch where it leads."

"It leads to the 'Mignonette' surely?"

But Forbes shook his head.

"Not 'surely' at all. Speaking generally the man who called himself 'Archer' was a common type—tall, slim, quite decent in his outward behaviour. But Daniel is the last man to have met

Sir Max Fordham socially—even abroad. I think without doubt that 'Archer' and Daniel were one; but I see no reason whatever for assuming he was the visitor to the 'Mignonette' that Borlase reports. Even if he was, we have Sir Max's word for it that he returned safely ashore in one of the yacht's boats."

"His word to the Riverton police for it—yes."

"And what more will you hear if you question Sir Max on his return?"

"That lies with Sir Max himself," I explained.

"He'll only tell you that somebody he knew spent an hour on the ship and went away again. He may, of course, ask you what the devil business it is of yours."

"He may. That's where I assume my best bedside manner, Newton. But don't think I shall approach the baronet in the haughty and overpowering spirit of the professional, or pretend to the majesty of the Law. We have met, remember, and parted the best of friends. There is always Lady Fordham, and I can begin very pleasantly with her and certain intelligence quite likely to interest her in a mild fashion."

"Her late lady's maid?"

"Exactly. How I proceed to a private interview with her husband will depend upon chance and opportunity. The point interesting me for the moment concerns our Daniel and his various *noms de guerre*. I shall probably find that Sir Max never heard of the honourable gentleman who went to the hotel. That, however, will not discourage me, because Daniel would not pretend to be anybody in the peerage when in the company of a baronet. What I want to learn next, apart from the real connection between Daniel and Sir Max—always assuming Daniel was his visitor that night—is under what name he knew Daniel and the extent of his information concerning him."

"Which, if there was anything in the idea that Sir Max is responsible for this job, you certainly won't get."

"There you speak like the amateur. Sir Max Fordham, old lad, is a man I have already had a brief opportunity to study. He is a man of whom it may be declared that he is brave against the elements, but possibly not so brave confronted with his fellow men and women. Possibly least brave when in the companionship of his wife. Incidentally his very unusual wealth is largely owed to her. He was always a very rich man, but not a millionaire twice over until he joined forces with the lady—the orphan daughter of a shipping magnate, who had to sell his well-found fleet to the Government during the war and was paid for it with the lavish folly that characterised all national expenditure during that period."

"Well," asked Forbes. "What then ?"

"Inspiration must determine. I do not for a moment believe that Sir Max poisoned his visitor, because I should say such an act was impossible to such a man ; but I do believe that he may know a great deal more about that visitor than he told the Riverton police ; and my purpose is to learn those particulars if diplomacy and tact can extract them."

Forbes shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't put it past you to do that," he confessed. "But I'm afraid that you're on a false scent and only wasting time. My own opinion, for what it is worth, would be that the visitor to the yacht was all right and that you'll probably soon hear enough to convince you that he was. I'll bet ten to one that Sir Max will be able to put you on his track—give you the name of his club or something—and you'll find him a wash out."

"Ten to one is a fair bet," I answered, "and I'll take it in guineas. I hope very much you are wrong and that I still have Daniel in sight, but the event will prove it. For the rest we must possess our souls in patience until the return of the 'Mignonette' before Christmas."

But there happened something to occupy a day or two of the time, and a week later I received a letter from John Fleming. He wrote from Bath—a typical letter under his new name :

No. 4 Roman Terrace,
Bath.
13 *December*, 1930.

Dear Doctor Meredith,

It was understood between us that I should keep you informed of my movements and that you should let me know if any light has dawned on the mystery of the dead yachtsman, to whom I owe so much. From your silence I fear that you have learned nothing concerning him and that darkness still envelops his taking off ; but be that as it may, I have certain information to impart concerning myself and the lady who has honoured me by becoming my wife. We were married at a registry office three days ago after a few weeks sojourn in this historic city ; and here I have 'set up my rest', in Shakespearean phrase, and continue a career devoted as formerly to the sacred cause of Art.

Such was my unexpected skill upon the harp that I swiftly attained to some measure of mastery over that wonderful instrument, and I find in this venerable spot a body of intelligent persons not unequal to appreciating my growing powers. The musicians employed at the Pump

Room are men of talent and culture and I have reason to believe that I may presently obtain an 'audition' and achieve permanent work when my skill increases, as it daily does. The atmosphere of this place is restful and attractive to a cultured man. Private persons in good localities welcome me at their thresholds once a fortnight, for tact and good taste never permit me to impose my music upon them oftener than that. At two abodes I have already been invited to call once a week—a practical appreciation of my art, which has given me pleasure. My wife is happy and her devotion and understanding support me through those dark days which occur less frequently than of old, but which no artist of any distinction can altogether evade.

With respect to the capital on which my first substantial success in life has been founded, needless to say that I continue to regard it as a loan. For the present any return would be inconvenient, but I design in due course to pay back every farthing with five per cent. interest. If you should fail, as now seems certain, in your endeavours to discover the defunct source of revenue, then I shall regard this loan as a direct interposition of Providence, and repay it to some charitable institution at a future time.

You will observe that I have now finally decided on a name and henceforth propose to regard myself as

Yours truly,

Sebastian Denvers.

"The light-hearted way in which people play about with their names in this case is very curious," I remarked to Forbes, who was not as much entertained by this letter as he should have been. But he had always disliked John Fleming and much doubted whether he was legally justified in these vagaries.

"He may prove the villain of the piece yet," grumbled Newton.

For my part I determined to visit Bath and renew acquaintance with the young couple. I recollected that Milly must have been upon the yacht on the evening of the unknown visitor's call, and it occurred to me that she might have some recollection of the event.

To Bath I went and found the complacent harper and his very happy companion. I was vague on the subject of my own information but admitted a measure of progress. Milly, however, could tell me nothing of any interest or value.

"I was packing that night in the mistress's cabin," explained Sebastian's bride. "People were always coming and going when we were in harbour. But I didn't see or hear of anybody."

I congratulated them upon their union and the turn of fortune's wheel. I also promised definite information if ever it should come to hand, and so left them and returned home. I had reminded them of the admirable Mrs. Wilson at Ealing and indicated that it might be a very great relief to her mind did she learn that her old lodger was still in the flesh and more happy than of yore; but the musician held it undesirable to take any such step.

"I have broken with the past," he said, "and desire to make the fracture complete in every possible particular. Mrs. Wilson has long got over her sorrows and there is no necessity to create needless difficulties for the sake of sentiment. She was always an inquiring woman and once she learns that I still live, she would probably come to see me and ask all manner of embarrassing questions that I should not wish to answer."

For another two weeks I waited until news of the 'Mignonette's' return, my idea being to do nothing until the travellers were back at Clyst and then pay my visit; but circumstances altered this plan, and early on a morning when I tramped Daleham's little landing-stage for my usual exercise and a breath off the sea, I met Forbes and he gave me news.

"Look," he said, pointing across the Bay to Riverton, and, taking my field-glasses from their case, I peered through a morning of poor visibility across a grey sea, slashed with running foam. There sat the beautiful yacht—home again and lying at anchor half a mile outside the harbour.

"She's only just come in," declared the inspector. "I saw her round the Head."

I shut my glasses and returned them to their case.

"Then why delay?" I asked. "They're likely to be busy and the people may go ashore during the day; but I ought to catch them. Lady Fordham will certainly see me, if only for a moment, and I shall be able to judge whether the more important interview had better be postponed."

"No doubt you've got it all cut and dried for them," said Forbes, and I admitted that was so.

"Interest people and you can get your way; bore them and you're doomed," I said, "but I have items of interest for them both."

In an hour I was at Riverton and by good chance fell in with the fisherman, Borlase, smoking among companions on the old pier. He remembered me and was willing to serve me now. A pretty brisk south-easter bombarded the Bay, and to reach the 'Mignonette' was a doubtful feat for a small, open boat; but Borlase quickly summoned a motor-launch equal to the task. She had a weather-proof cabin forward and we danced out and made a quick passage. The launch came under the lee of the great steam yacht and, bidding the two men who sailed her stand by for me, I went aboard. All was hurry and confusion, but a sailor summoned a steward and I soon found myself in the saloon. I had despatched my card to Lady Fordham. She kept me waiting no time and arrived, trim, cool and collected as ever. She was in good spirits, greeted me agreeably and guessed my errand.

"This is kind of you, Doctor," she said. "I'm sure you've put yourself out to bring me news of Milly."

"I promised you," I told her, "and, seeing this morning that you were home again, thought that I could tell you the story quicklier if we met."

"Then there is a story?"

"Hardly that; but her brief adventures have ended happily for her, though not I fear happily for you if you wanted her again."

It was not my purpose, at any rate for the present, to tell the true story of Milly and her harpist, nor did I wish a ray of light thrown upon the end of Mr. Daniel, or desire to relate the circumstances which ran Milly's tale into the other. A time might come when these things could be told; but for the moment I merely related that the girl had found consolation and wedded a young man, who pursued his calling at Bath and was in a position to give her a comfortable home.

"At present," I told her, "they live in lodgings;

but her husband hopes soon to get a little house for her."

"Aren't they extraordinary !" she said.

"They are," I admitted.

I rather thought she might inquire for Milly's new name and address, but she did not and her interest soon evaporated. There was no sign of Sir Max and, at this moment, glancing through a porthole, I saw the steamer's motor pinnace pushing out for shore and noticed that he and his captain were aboard her. I hoped that the cruise had been crowned with success, and Lady Fordham declared that all had gone well. And then, as I shook hands and prepared to go ashore, an idea suddenly struck her.

"I wonder," she asked, "if you would do me a great kindness ?"

"Very willingly, if it is in my power," I replied, clutching at a possible straw of hope.

"It's old Thorne," she exclaimed. "We're bothered about him. He hurt his hand two days out from Barbados and it's gone from bad to worse. He swears it is nothing and will cure itself, but it's badly inflamed and hasn't begun to mend. The trouble is that he hates doctors and nothing we can say to him will send him ashore to see one ; but, since you are on the ship, you might surprise him.

A stranger would carry more weight with the obstinate old boy than we do. Is it quite unprofessional to ask you and would you mind very much?"

"Of course I'll see him," I answered. "I will, at any rate, tell you what is the matter and if he ought to be treated, or can treat himself."

She was greatly obliged and asked me to accompany her.

"He's in his cabin," she said, "and suffering from a very bad temper at being disabled."

I followed Lady Fordham forward to a little separate cabin in the forecastle head where sat the old sailor on his bunk with his left hand in a bowl of warm water. He frowned at the sight of a stranger, but moderated his annoyance a little when he recognised me.

"Now, Samuel," began the lady. "We must have no more nonsense. Dr. Meredith didn't come to see you; he came to see me; but since he is here, he has most kindly consented to have a look at your hand and see if you are right about it getting better without proper attention."

The old man got up and saluted.

"Just a spot of a gathering, Doctor," he said, "though how the mischief it fastened on me, I couldn't tell you. I was cutting a piece of clean wood at the time and clean wood don't give you no gatherings. If you could cut this rotten thumb off my hand, I doubt I'd be all right."

"We don't cut off thumbs without very good reason, Mr. Thorne," I assured him. Then I opened his port, for the little den needed air.

It was a strange place full of queer treasures. A sailor's ditty box elaborately carved hung lashed over the bunk, and round about were photographs of ships, of Tor Grange, Clyst, and of his master and mistress. A crate of bananas filled one corner and Lady Fordham protested when she saw it. West Indian curios he had also collected—calabash gourds, a glazed frame containing a picture made of brilliant little shells, walking sticks of tropical woods, a dozen green coco-nuts huddled in a corner and a big bottle of raw lime-juice from Montserrat.

His hand was very seriously inflamed and his old eyes had missed the reason. Nor, evidently, had anybody else been able to discover it; but there was a splinter of wood driven deep under his thumbnail and the swelling almost served to conceal it. Needless to say I availed myself instantly of this incident. I made friends with the patient, strove to alarm him, and proposed to attend him. Nothing but the truth was necessary.

"An ugly hand," I said, "and suppurating. It's more than time it was looked to. I'll go home and get my tools. It can't be done without them. You've got a huge splinter driven almost out of reach under your nail."

Lady Fordham protested.

"We really can't bother you," she said. 'Samuel, must go ashore to hospital."

"I'm an idle man," I answered, "and shall be exceedingly pleased to look after Mr. Thorne. The word 'suppurating' had alarmed the old sailor. He did not know what it meant, but it sounded serious.

"If so be you'll cure me for use, I'll be thankful, Doctor. But for God's love don't run me in a hospital."

"No need. I'll cure you 'for use'," I promised him, "and be back in an hour or two. Meantime lie low and keep quiet. You must be in a good deal of pain."

His mistress was gracious and much obliged. Doubtless she deemed that my amiability sprang from that old impulse to serve wealth, common until modern class-consciousness substituted the new impulse to rob wealth.

Promising to be back in a couple of hours, I returned ashore and took a taxi-cab for home. In the course of the afternoon I found my trouble rewarded, for, upon returning to the yacht, the first person to meet me was Sir Max Fordham and he expressed himself in generous terms as to my kindness.

"Uncommonly sporting of you, Doctor," he said, shaking hands, "and believe me I'm exceedingly obliged. We wouldn't have anything serious happen to Samuel for the world; but in some remarkable way you've got round him."

"Only frightened him," I answered, "and it is quite serious. He's got a very nasty hand and blood-poisoning might go badly with a man of his age."

He took me to the old sailor and asked me to join him in the saloon presently when my work was done.

Then I extracted a monstrous splinter from Samuel's thumb, and gave the wounded member a surgical dressing. He stood an exceedingly painful ordeal with great courage and expressed the heartiest possible gratitude for my ministration.

"I feel so spry as a new born babe," he said. "I doubt I'll be well as ever to-morrow, Doctor; and, if I may make so bold, I'd dearly like for you to take any of these here curiosities as a keepsake—all genuine."

"I will," I promised, "when I've done with you, Samuel. I'll take one of those walking-sticks and I shall always value it as a gift from you. But you haven't got a clean bill of health yet. That hand is going to want watching and dressing for a few days. How long d'you stop here?"

"A matter of a week I daresay. Not the family: they go home to-morrow and me with 'em; but she's here for a few more days, then she goes to Southampton."

"I must see you to-morrow anyway; and then I shall judge if you can be trusted to look after yourself."

I found Sir Max writing in the saloon and gave him a full account of Samuel's disaster. He swore that everybody in the yacht, including Thorne himself, must be a damned fool to have missed the source of the trouble, and was concerned to know if any sort of danger existed.

"But little," I said. "Yet I'm not going to speak positively till to-morrow. I'll leave my things here to-night, see him again in the morning and put a fresh dressing on the wound. There is a lot of inflammation to be subdued and he must have suffered abominably."

"I suppose he did; but they have a different organisation from ours. Tougher—tougher. They can endure what would drive us mad—mentally and physically. Lady Fordham's gone ashore to relations here. We're awfully grateful. Do sit down for five minutes."

I had visited the West Indies and was especially familiar with Grenada and Trinidad, so matter for conversation easily opened. Sir Max declared the sugar industry doomed if swift steps were not taken to subsidise it. The subject interested him and I let him run on and established a very friendly understanding before approaching my own business. But the time ran out, and at last I made my venture.

"You'll be busy," I said at length, during a pause in the conversation, "and I must not trade on your leisure. I'll see Thorne to-morrow pretty early before you go ashore, and I hope that I shall then be able to say comfortable words about him. And now I'll take this opportunity, if it's not bothering you, to remind you of that local mystery when you were in here last. You can really serve me there. A good deal of interest attaches to it and some day I shall hope to tell you more. I'm not merely poking my nose into other people's business—don't imagine any such thing; but I happen to know a good deal that is interesting concerning the vanished man and I'm rather keen to satisfy myself as to details where I can. It's really a matter of elimination and only two persons remain to be considered—a very shadowy pair."

He became alert, dropped his cigarette into an ash tray, and lighted another with his eyes upon me.

"That bother about somebody who came aboard one night?"

"Yes—it's interesting. Probably the police only wanted particulars of your guest and didn't give you any of the chap who disappeared from the hotel. He must have been a queer bird. Called himself the 'Honourable Neville Archer'."

"There's no such person that I ever heard of," he said. "I told the police so."

"There is no such person. That's where the fun begins. He was masquerading for his own reasons—left his hotel in yachting kit, promised to return in a few hours, and never did so. His scanty luggage revealed nothing. But circumstances, which I'm keeping to myself for the moment, have made me exceedingly interested in this beggar and I'm rather keen to be dead sure he wasn't your man. A boatman called Borlase brought your caller out to the 'Mignonette' after nine o'clock, and all I know is that you put him ashore an hour or two later. The sole point to clench is this: Could that man by any possibility have been the vanished one? The police assumed the impossibility and

I expect they are right enough; but you will be doing me a considerable service if you can definitely eliminate your man from your personal knowledge of him."

My listener did not answer at once, but considered what I had said. I could see his rather simple mind at work and perceived that, in reality, he was by no means prepared to give the necessary assurance. The phase passed, however, and a look of unquestionable uneasiness also passed. He shook his head.

"I'm afraid you're on the wrong trail, Doctor. My man, so to call him, was a Mr. Forest—at least that's the name he gave. I don't really know much more about him than that. People scrape acquaintance with me. He'd met me down South—so he said—and I've no reason to doubt it; but, living my life, you can't remember everybody you chance upon."

"I can well understand that. No doubt plenty are keen to presume friendship on very occasional meetings."

"Plenty. Every second bounder with money seems to have got a yacht nowadays. Anyway, he said he was called Forest. I didn't know him from Adam and wished him at Jericho, because I was very busy that night. He yarned and yarned and then I gave him a drink. I happened to be alone, as my wife was spending the evening ashore. At last I hinted that I was exceedingly busy and he said he'd told his boat to come at eleven; but he had the grace to take the hint and pretended to remember an appointment ashore, so I put him off."

Truth and untruth were mingled in this story, and I knew, not so much by the words, but by certain evasion of manner and calculation of speech, that it was so. I felt perturbed and desirous to be gone; but the opportunity had not yet been explored to the full. For Sir Max was perturbed too.

"A great nuisance for you," I said, "and here am I doing just what Mr. Forest did and wasting your time. Yet I can't feel quite happy about the gentleman since you know so little of him."

His manner changed slightly, and grew less cordial and more intent.

"Why not? The blighter isn't likely to have pretended he was anybody else, is he?"

"Not on the face of it; but I don't feel quite satisfied. You may hear more some day and learn that you entertained anything but an angel unawares."

He sat up on that and stared hard at me. He puffed his cheeks—a habit with some men at moments of emotion—and the blood came to his face.

"What the devil d'you mean ?" he asked.

Thorne created a diversion at this moment, for despite his injured hand, he came in with a tray on which appeared a little Tantalus stand of silver containing spirits and some bottles of Apollinaris.

I welcomed the interruption and spoke to the sailor.

"Go light with that hand, Thorne. You should not use it to-day."

He grinned, set the tray on a side table and began to open the aerated water.

"What will you have ?" asked Sir Max, restraining himself before the servant.

"Just a spot of whiskey. And in answer to your question, Sir Max, as to what the devil I mean, I mean that if the vanished 'honourable' gentleman and 'Mr. Forest' were one, then I might have a very interesting investigation to make. My only object here is to prove that they were not, and I hoped you would help me to do it. But you don't."

"I see—I quite see. It all sounds rather mad to me. I really can't help you any more. The facts are simply as I state them. The man wasn't a gentleman, or anything like one. He said he'd got a cutter here, but he didn't ask me to see her. His real business, God knows."

"His business with you?"

"None—none at all. I've told you that he only came to waste my time."

"You put him ashore?"

"Yes—I told the police that."

Thorne brought me my drink at this moment and I rose as he did so, while Sir Max turned to the old man.

"Who put that bounder ashore that night, Samuel? You remember. A Mr. Forest, who stopped beyond his welcome last time we were here."

Thorne considered and the incident returned to his recollection.

"I mind it, sir. The pinnace was in harbour waiting for Lady Fordham and a lot had got leave. We was short-handed. It was the cook's mate—man name of Wills—who rowed the gentleman back."

"Your very good health, Sir Max, and many thanks. You shall hear more of the mystery if ever I do. But I'm afraid it begins to look rather insoluble."

We shook hands and he did not conceal his relief that my cross-questioning was at an end. I felt very certain that when I came to see my patient on the following day, Sir Max would be ashore.

On reviewing the new situation it began to unfold in a somewhat depressing pattern, for while exceedingly gratified at the success of my deductions, built upon somewhat dubious material, I now began to realise the very massive difficulties with which they had confronted me. I plumed myself and took some satisfaction in the thing I had actually accomplished; but for the moment failed to see the nature of any next move. It was exceedingly clear to me that 'Mr. Forest' must have been one with the man who vanished from his hotel and one with Lionel Daniel.

So far I moved easily. Sir Max Fordham had reacted strongly to the challenge—both strongly and clumsily. He was in truth no diplomat and, seeing the obvious significance of Mr. Forest's visit, he should not have reacted at all, but concealed any uneasiness awakened by the recollection. He had disliked his visitor and endured discomfort from the visit, which pointed directly to the correctness of my private theories; but it was equally obvious that I could not expect to learn any particulars of the truth from Sir Max. Yet I told myself that, instead of being cast down, it would better become me to feel elated at this further evidence that I still advanced upon the right track.

In reality, however, the element of great uneasiness now clouding my thoughts concerned the future. Among his evasions as to the nocturnal visitor, Sir Max had uttered undoubted truths, and they indefinitely extended the inquiry. He had much disliked Mr. Forest, but I knew that he had not poisoned him, and believed that he was ignorant of the man's adventures after leaving the 'Mignonette'. That Daniel had returned ashore seemed certain, while his subsequent fate appeared to point to another series of circumstances and, for me, a renewed inquiry, beginning all over again from some starting-point impossible at present to determine. Herein lay the cause of my depression and I examined what possibilities might be counted in favour of a future task.

So far as I could see there was but one way of learning anything more, and that way had apparently been barred. The only person I had yet met who knew anything whatever of Daniel's secret activities was Sir Max Fordham, and though thus far, and doubtless by the very nature of their connection, the yachtsman had no intention whatever of adding to my knowledge, yet here, if anywhere, appeared my solitary chance of more information. The question for me was how to break down the barrier and win Sir Max; but the answer appeared devastating, for the more correct my own private conviction of the truth, the less likely was he to oblige me in the least particular.

I devoted a very great deal of thought to the problem, for it seemed certain that only by solving it should I ever hear anything more of the dead man, or reach a sign-post to those who actually destroyed him. Even so, the chances were small, for, assuming that I could break down Fordham's defences and discover all that he knew, it by no means followed that he knew enough to help me forward another stage. He probably knew that Daniel was a scoundrel and, if my theory were correct, had cause to do so; but clever men like the defunct dealer in curios move in darkness under many assumed names. They are difficult to trace and spend no small part of their ingenuity and craft in preserving their own freedom and liberty of action. Sir Max's information, even if I secured it, was likely to prove limited to his own personal experience; but it was all I had to hope for and might, of course, tell me much more than the teller himself knew. Some time elapsed ere any inspiration rewarded my far-reaching thoughts, and meanwhile I fulfilled a promise, and early on the following day returned to Riverton, boarded the yacht and looked after my patient. Sir Max, as I expected, had gone ashore;

but Lady Fordham saw me, inquired after Thorne and expressed gratification when I gave a good report of him.

"He is doing well—better than I had any right to expect," I told her. "Remind him to dress the wound as often as I have directed and not scamp it. I propose to see him again in a few days and shall come to Clyst to do so."

"You are too good, but is that really necessary ?"

"Be sure it is wise, Lady Fordham, or I shouldn't suggest it."

"Then we will leave our indebtedness till then," she said. "Come to luncheon any day. We are at home till January, or even a little later. By that time it is quite certain that Sir Max and I shall be pining to go to sea again and have our plans completed."

I left the 'Mignonette' well satisfied with this arrangement and in hope of an inspiration before the appointment called to be kept.

CHAPTER X

NO LIGHT

Two days later there came for me from Clyst a brace of remarkably fine pheasants from Sir Max Fordham, and, hating high game, I summoned Newton Forbes and bade him join me to eat one on the evening after their arrival. He consented to come, and I found him in a gloomy mood and occupied with melancholy subjects.

For a time he inveighed against the Socialist Government, and the Liberals who continued to keep it in precarious power.

"The doctrine that private wealth is an economic sin against the State belongs, no doubt, to the principles of their rotten creed," he grumbled. "Theft is vital to Socialism, just as murder is vital to Communism, and the ultimate death of both abominations lies in that fact; but to find the Liberals supporting this blackguard business and helping to make it practical politics—that points to something devilish sinister going on in secret if you ask me."

"We'll hope it means the end of Liberalism at the next general election," I prophesied. "The rot is at the root of that aged tree and the trend of national affairs will soon point to a life and death conflict that leaves no room for lookers on. Accident gives the perishing party an exaggerated power in the House quite out of keeping with its real significance in affairs. No party can persist if its fiscal principles are outworn. Talk of something else more cheerful."

"I will talk of something else, but not more cheerful," he answered. "Have you considered the present agitation against capital punishment? I'm blessed if I know what to think exactly."

"As a policeman, you should not halt between opinions," I assured him. "I have been mildly interested in the evidence before Commission. But does it go with this attractive pheasant?"

"Hang the pheasant," he answered.

"And hang the murderer—at least hang the average murderer," I said.

"There is no average murderer, Doctor. The whole question is made to turn on whether capital punishment is a deterrent, and there will always be a wide difference of opinion. You can't prove it one way or the other to my mind."

"Morally," I answered, "the question ought not to turn on that at all. Experienced people, whose business brings them into close contact with criminals, for the most part hold capital punishment to be a mighty strong deterrent and, of course, we have the classical argument of the burglar, who eschews fire-arms or any other lethal weapons, for fear, when in danger of capture, that he may lose his nerve and use them to win a precarious hour of liberty. That wrecks the argument of those who argue murder committed on the impulse of the moment is not murder at all. The burglar, at any rate, knows it is at present. Murder continues to be murder; but to hang murderers simply as a deterrent has no moral excuse whatever. To hang them because they are murderers, however, appears to me quite sound. One would imagine that those who pin their faith to Holy Writ should feel no doubt upon the point; but, in practice, you find that it is precisely upon religious grounds they assert their claim to change the law."

"More and more of them get off anyway," said Forbes, "and that's indecent in itself. Either keep it, or scrap it; but nothing makes justice more of a laughing-stock than to hear a judge pronounce sentence of death, when everybody is quite sure the sentence won't be carried out. That's farce, and a disgusting sort of farce."

I agreed with him.

"All our laws need codifying and bringing up to date. The whole business reeks with archaic follies; but all this cumbrous tomfoolery pays the lawyers, so they stick to it. The fatal fix we are in is this: that lawyers make the laws and have us in the hollow of their hands. But capital punishment isn't lucrative, I suppose, to anybody save the hangman. In the meantime what can we substitute? There is a very numerous type of criminal who preys on society and won't work unless he's made to work. He would murder just as willingly as he steals, and he is merely prevented from taking human life because he has no wish to part with his own. He is worse than a brute for all social purposes. Colonel Hales pointed that out before the Commission. Such a being, were capital punishment to cease, would become a peril that must demand a dozen new civil obligations and expenses to oppose it. Abolish the death penalty and you must, for example, arm the police to start with."

"A very proper thing to do in any case," declared Forbes. "That emphatically should be done."

"It should. We are the only police force in Europe, or America, that isn't armed. But consider what would be likely to follow. Picture scenes in the Strand, or Regent Street, such as appear familiar in New York and Chicago. Without the death penalty, every officer in a convict prison would carry his life in his hand. Revenge is a potent temptation, and what matters it to the man with a life sentence if he kills in the meantime? Only physical fear makes the warder safe from his charges. And these people are still always with us—in prison and out. They are low grade creatures generally, with brain power under-developed in any social direction, over-developed in purely animal and criminal qualities; and for that matter all mentality, or the intellect which lifts us above animal and plant, is a tender business. We have a very long way to go yet towards breeding a better norm of brain, and I certainly should not lift any of the bars which we find necessary in the human menagerie at present."

"We are all near the border-line still, you mean?"

"Of course. Consciousness is a thing of yesterday, speaking geologically, and, in any case, conscience is only education. Nobody yet was ever born with a conscience, or with self-consciousness either. We are born imbecile, and if we live long enough, we die imbecile. In many individuals brain cells have a shorter life than either sex or body cells. Thousands of us are simply unable to re-act properly to our environment, and, so long as we ignore eugenics and brain-breeding, so long will such people be born. Until we have ceased to breed indiscriminately, we must prepare for them and guard against them—at any rate till they overwhelm us, which, at the present gait, they soon will do."

"The penal code is not too strong then, Doctor?"

"I fear not," I said. "Of course the opposition refers to countries where capital punishment does not exist; but many questions of national character and training should enter into such statistics. The fact remains that in no country is murder so rare as in our own. Granted that an actual murderer has not been frightened from his crime by the possible consequences. Well, never was a man with soul so dead but he damned the consequences on some occasion of his life; but who shall say how many citizens have been deterred from murder by the legal consequence? It has been pointed out, too, that deterrence does much more than merely help a man to resist sudden temptation. The sub-conscious knowledge of perpetual deterrence inculcates a habit of mind which prevents any serious temptation from even arising. It is a part of education. Then why keep the murderer in health security and reasonable comfort for his life as a reward for flouting our decent safeguards?"

"Crimes of violence are on the increase, hanging, or no hanging," declared Forbes. "That's a certainty; and my argument is simply this: that any outcry against physical punishment is illogical and idiotic, for why hesitate to use physical punishment against those who themselves use it upon their victims?"

"Lynch law is still in practice in civilised countries," I reminded him; "and would soon take shape among us also, if the old prescription fails. The instinct of the average man is that milk and water is no punishment for those who shed blood; while, for my part, I hold that there are not a few other crimes fully as deserving of capital punishment as murder. Murder must ever be a question of degree, and a gulf of ethical values will separate one murder from another; but there are wholesale villainies perpetrated against the social and moral foundations of society that deserve hanging every time."

"Such as——?" asked my friend.

"Such as the purveying of noxious drugs," I told him.

"And now," he said, "what about your last adventure? You have kept off it rather carefully this evening I note."

"I have kept off it," I answered, "for the very good reason that, so far, you have not given me a chance to get on it. There was no adventure involved by my visit to the 'Mignonette'—merely something in the nature of a disappointment. I cannot even admit that, speaking exactly; because the main point was gained. So I ought perhaps to be pleased with myself. It is only when looking forward to the next step that I feel a good deal at a loss."

"Fancy admitting that you are at a loss!" he said.

"Only to you," I replied, "and I doubt not in any case that I shall weather the storm. What I have done is to prove to my satisfaction that the 'Mr. Forest' who visited the yacht, was the 'Neville Archer' who vanished from the hotel, and also, incidentally, our defunct Daniel. So far so good; but now one is confronted with a situation that demands most careful thought. Perhaps I am up against my first real difficulty."

"Poor unlucky man!" he grunted.

After dinner Forbes listened to the conversation with Sir Max Fordham and appreciated the nature of my problem. But he proved not fertile of suggestions and only took the situation as another peg on which to hang his own obstinate conviction: that this had ceased to be any business of mine.

"It proves again what I have said a hundred times," he declared. "Every step you go shows how utterly futile it is for a private person to imagine they can get to the bottom of a puzzle like this without the recognised and lawful orginisation created to do so. I've expected each step you took into this quagmire would be your last, but chance and an amazing succession of lucky accidents have kept you afloat so far. And now you're finished, and all this valuable time has been wasted. Fifty to one your operations may end in defeating the law and adding to the list of undiscovered capital crimes."

"I knew you'd talk like that. You are the most hateful Job's comforter that any well-meaning inquirer ever found himself up against. But it's so easy to see through you, Newton. The green-eyed monster is actually glaring out of your eyes. Suppose, for argument's sake, that I do throw up the sponge, what would you do next, armed with the law? What can you do?"

"I can make Sir Max Fordham speak," he declared. "I can inform him that this is a criminal case involving murder, and that the law demands from him a full account of everything he knows concerning the 'Mr. Forest' who visited him upon his yacht and his private relations with the man."

"And suppose he actually says that he knows nothing, as he told me? Suppose he expresses utmost regret that it does not lie in his power to give you any information respecting Mr. Forest?

You cannot say to him, as I say to you, that his manner and a subtle air of discomfort and a suspected evasion in his speech incline you to doubt him. These delicacies lie outside a police inquiry, or a police inquirer. I am positive that Sir Max knows a great deal about this man. I'm equally positive that where I failed to glean the information, not a hundred professional detectives would prove more fortunate."

"That's mere conceit," replied Forbes. "You little know the extraordinary resources of a trained Scotland Yard man. They have a thousand dodges, and their power to cross-question makes the average barrister a duffer."

"Because they work in private, not before an audience and a jury in a law court, that compel the advocate to decency."

"At any rate I'll back the Force to get more out of Sir Max than you did. And it is time that we started to do it. The first question is, of course, what reason Sir Max may have for evasion, if he is really evasive."

"You have my word for that," I answered, "and it may interest you to know that I have every reason to believe his secret has also been discovered by me. And, as a matter of fact, therein lies my supreme present difficulty. One thing is obvious :

Sir Max Fordham didn't kill Daniel; and, though he may have been one of our potential murderers, and felt much inclined to do so, yet the safeguards of civilisation were strong enough to prevent any such achievement on his part."

"If you know his secret, I'd like to hear it," said Forbes; but that was where I prepared to get a little of my own back.

"You will not hear it," I promised him, "until a later stage in these intricate proceedings. I am now at the crisis of my fortunes, and success or failure may turn on the events of the day after to-morrow. Upon that day I propose to visit Clyst, see Sir Max once more and try again."

"Along what lines?" he asked.

"I am not going to tell you," I answered. "If I knew I should not tell you; but, at the present moment, I do not know. Exactly how I shall re-open this business to the owner of the 'Mignonette' is at present on the lap of the gods; but I suspect that everything is going to turn upon it, and if I fail again, then I will relinquish the struggle, rest on my laurels and see what you can do."

"Just going to trust to yet another inspiration—the gambler's last throw."

"And don't you hope I shan't win it!" I said.

"No," he assured me. "I hope you will win it;

but you've got to remember the law of averages. You can't go on striking oil for ever."

"Forty-eight hours looks to be all the time that is left to me, unless something dazzling happens," I admitted.

He was silent, and I could see that he had already begun to plan his own campaign. Indeed, his next words confirmed the suspicion.

"All this has made it infernally difficult for me," he growled. "Of course the first thing I shall be asked is why the devil I let you play about with a serious case, instead of bringing it instantly to official knowledge."

"Yes," I agreed, "you're going to have a hot time. But I'll stand by you, old man."

"He may not see you at all," proceeded Forbes, returning to Sir Max.

"I'm quite certain he would not if he knew I was coming. But he won't. It lies in a nutshell. I must get to him and arrest his attention, before he has time to be nasty and tell his myrmidons to turn me out."

"Just a bit of low cunning you may well bring off," he said; and when he had gone his scornful prediction was verified, for the long-delayed inspiration dawned. Suddenly, five minutes after I had put out my light and settled into my favourite sleeping position, I saw how to challenge and probably detain the yachtsman. It was a bold stroke and in what manner he might respond remained to be seen; but I felt that here, or nowhere, lay a chance of at least learning something that might help my next step to Lionel S. Daniel's mortal enemies. I planned a surprise for Sir Max, or at any rate an announcement well calculated to surprise him. He was no actor, and I felt pretty certain that I should be able to judge whether he already knew, or did not know, the information to be sprung upon him. In my opinion it should prove highly satisfactory information—information of a sort to warm his heart and perhaps open his mouth; and I expected some such reaction with possible results. But if he already knew what I proposed to tell him, then not only should I find myself disappointed, but deeply concerned. For, if my own cherished theory were correct, then Sir Max ought not to know.

Two days later I was at Tor Grange, Clyst, a little before ten o'clock, judging at that early hour I might fairly count to meet my man. As a matter of fact he was the second person I saw, for after the butler had admitted me and gone to fetch my patient, Sir Max came into the hall. He received me somewhat stiffly, but I disarmed him by alluding to Thorne and he thawed a trifle, declared the old man apparently restored to health, but thanked me for coming so far to see him.

"Only a precautionary measure," I said. "One likes to watch a patient through a trouble. I have to thank you very cordially for your generous gift, and I want you to grant me one more favour as we are not likely to meet again after to-day."

"Anything I can do of course," he answered.

"It is to give me five minutes after I have seen Thorne. Something rather interesting really—in view of our last conversation."

"There can be nothing whatever interesting in that to me, Doctor," he replied. "Quite the reverse in fact: but of course, I'm at your service. I told you every mortal thing I knew about the man."

He had appreciated to what I was referring and I answered in friendly terms.

"You did, and exceedingly good of you it was. You told me all you knew; but to be frank, I didn't tell you all I knew; and what I know may prove of very considerable interest to you."

He showed impatience but did not reply and, at the same moment, Thorne appeared. The three of us went into a study opening at the end of a passage and facing east.

"He's well, or says he is," declared the master, and Thorne assured me that it was so. A glance proved the truth of the statement. The wound had healed cleanly and I congratulated the old sailor on his constitution. He thanked me heartily and was gone; whereon I turned to Sir Max.

The yachtsman pointed to an easy chair by the fire and then opened his cigarette case, took a cigarette and handed the case to me. He lighted his own and reclined in a big 'Chesterfield' opposite mine, with the morning sunlight on his face. He looked bronzed, hard and hearty, but his blue eyes were restless and he did not attempt to conceal the fact that I was a nuisance, if no worse.

I delayed to speak and he returned to my last remark.

"I shall, as you say, be interested to learn what you thought proper to conceal concerning Forest, Doctor Meredith. Though why you ever bothered me, if you knew more about him than I did, I cannot understand."

"I knew more—and less," I answered. "And I delayed to tell you what I knew in hope that, while you were innocent of the knowledge and undisturbed by it, you might feel disposed to tell me facts that would have thrown light on what I know. But I was mistaken. It did not suit your convenience to help me; though forgive me if I say that you might have done so."

"What the devil d'you want to bully me about the cursed man for?" he broke out, growing red under his skin. "And why do you suggest that I'm a liar? I've had enough of this."

"One moment, and I'm gone for good. I pursue this subject in connection with you, Sir Max, for no reason whatever save friendship to you. Not for an instant do I suggest you are a liar. It is not lying to refuse to answer questions, or give information you do not choose to answer, or to give. I merely mean that, for your own sufficient reasons, you did not tell me all you knew of Forest, and I don't blame you for an instant. You might as justly say that I lied, because I did not tell you all I knew. And now—in hope that what I can say will prove a source of satisfaction to you—I have risked this unpleasant interview and come to say it."

"All right, all right," he answered. He had flung his cigarette into the fire and now took another.

"Forest—or the man you knew as Forest—has been murdered," I said. Then I lighted my own cigarette with my eyes on his face, that I might learn everything possible from the way he took the information.

One thing was certain: it astounded him and, for a moment, nothing but amazement was indicated; but as the fact got home, his personal view of it became apparent. He may have tried to simulate indifference, but he could not. A look of utmost satisfaction, not unmixed with primitive savagery, crossed his face and his subsequent words were an echo to this expression. But for the moment it died as quickly as it came and anxiety clouded his broad features. To explain that, following as it did on the former relief, was difficult; but he himself made it clear. His first comment was a question.

"Are you absolutely sure, Doctor? Is this a fact beyond any possible doubt whatever, or merely a suspicion on your part?"

Fear that I might be mistaken was all that had temporarily shadowed him and I hastened to ease his mind.

"It is as certain as anything can be," I said. "He is in his grave and has been for three months."

"Murdered?"

"Yes."

His intense satisfaction was no longer to be concealed and he made no attempt to conceal it. Forgetting the information that his pleasure must afford me and the confusion that it cast into his statements at our former meeting, he spoke.

"The best news I've heard for many a long day, and I take off my hat to those who had pluck to do it. If ever a man wanted murdering it was that man. I'm glad the swine is dead."

He panted with emotion and I struck while the iron was hot.

"Something told me you would not go into mourning for him, Sir Max. That's why I have let you know this. I want you to understand, too, that I have nothing whatever to do with the police. I came upon these incidents quite by chance and am following them through for my own satisfaction alone. It was I who discovered that the man had been done to death; and the more I learned concerning him, the more satisfied I felt that he had probably earned his fate, as you assert."

"If ever a scoundrel did," he declared.

"Exactly. But now we come to the point. You shall have the whole curious story if you like at a future time, for I should wish to give you my confidence in exchange for yours, and prove the correctness of my assertions; but, for the moment, my interest naturally turns to those who murdered him. He must have died within twenty-four hours of his visit to you. Possibly sooner. It is also practically certain that he died at Riverton. You had no hand whatever in his death, though you are not sorry to hear of it. You knew him for a damned rascal and it is a satisfaction to you to hear that he has gone where the rascals may go. But you will see, I am sure, that since this is so, you can at least return a measure of confidence for mine and help me to get at the truth about his end. I don't mean that any of the details are known to you; but I do mean that you know something about him and possibly about his associates and probable enemies. A man like that would earn enemies. He evidently did so, and they were powerful enough to destroy him. Give me credit for infinite consideration and tact in my inquiry and understand that you have nothing to do with it personally. Your name will never be mentioned in connection with it by me. As I said when we met to-day, it is unlikely that you will ever see me again after this morning. But for purely academic and artistic reasons, quite unconnected with the law, I am exceedingly anxious to learn who killed the man you knew as 'Forest'. You have only to answer two or three questions."

But he was not listening and had fastened on a former part of this long speech.

"Killed at Riverton—then I bet it was for the——" He was going to say 'Money', but stopped himself in time and turned to the end of my remarks. "I'll answer fifty questions if I can," he said. "But I would not lift a finger to hurt anybody who had the nerve to do in that infernal snake. I'd have murdered him myself if I could have got away with it, and I hope they will get away with it. As a matter of fact, however, I'm afraid, even if I had the will, I lack any power to help you."

"I am myself much afraid you do lack any power to help me," I admitted. "If my theory of Forest is correct, you won't have much light to throw upon him. The first question is, when and where you met him, and probably I know the answer. However, let me hear you say it."

"He met me. I did not meet him. I'm not going to tell you anything personal, Doctor, and you won't expect me to do so. I can only say he came to me."

"Alone ?"

"Yes."

"More than once ?"

He nodded.

"His last visit was the third," he said.

"He came by appointment no doubt—giving you sufficient notice of his visit ?"

The victim nodded again.

"On the second and third—thank God the last—occasion he gave me notice he was coming."

"You have no knowledge whatever of any of his associates ?"

"No."

"For the reason that he doubtless had none," I said. "Such men work alone."

"I hope you may be right," answered Sir Max, and I reassured him.

"Believe me, yes. His sort play a lone hand, because they must. Take my word for it he has handed on no evil legacy to anybody else. He didn't have time in any case."

The big fellow uttered an expiration of evident relief, and the fact that I had gathered without words the nature of his persecution, made him a little more confiding.

"You're a man of the world, Doctor, and I appreciate your tact. I wish I could help you; but honestly I cannot. You probably guess at everything I had to endure—except the reason."

"Which I decline to know in any case, as it has nothing whatever to do with the matter, Sir Max. The reason is no man's affair but your own. One may guess that you are not the sole sufferer, and I wish I knew where to find others, though, if I did, they would probably disappoint me, as you have. Yes, I'm disappointed, but not surprised. I judged pretty accurately and you may now think it only fair if I tell you more; but for the moment I shall not do so unless you insist."

"I want no more, save your assurance the blackguard is dead," he answered. "And I thank you again very heartily indeed for a valued piece of information. I'd have paid anybody ten thousand pounds with a very good appetite to hear what you have told me."

"You shall hear more," I promised, "and for the moment, though very disappointed and rather up against a blank wall, yet there is one bright thought—that I have been able to tell you something you were glad to know."

He took me to the door himself and we found Lady Fordham just entering her car. She showed her old friendship, thanked me for keeping my promise, and offered to drive me to Exeter. Then a glance of uneasiness from her husband told me volumes.

"More than kind," I said, "but I have my taxi and propose driving elsewhere before I return."

"You must really tell us what we owe you," she begged; but I laughed, assured them their kindness had amply repaid me, bade them 'good-bye' and departed.

Eminently satisfactory and gratifying to my self-esteem though the interview had been, I felt in no mood to dwell upon a triumph of ratiocination that led nowhere. All that I had accomplished was to cut Sir Max clean out of any connection with Lionel Daniel's murder, and in vain did I assure myself that this routine work had in reality advanced me along the road, because such advance appeared to have completed my journey and left it as far as ever from any satisfactory goal.

I considered whether further reasons for disbelieving the yachtsman existed and could find none; but even between the lines of his spoken word, while there remained enough to make his own relation with Daniel clear and confirm my belief, there was nothing to help to another chapter of the story. I weighed what the day had brought me and saw that it was only the assurance of past events and confirmation of my theory concerning them. Sir Max had been in the hands of a blackmailer, and one found no difficulty in guessing the nature of his error. Doubtless Daniel had known he was safe enough, thanks to circumstances that prevented his victim from retaliation. Blackmailers feel their ground very carefully before venturing upon it. But the fact offered no interest whatever for me; it was the melancholy conclusion that absorbed me now, and before I reached home again it threatened quite to overwhelm me. For the first time I saw no loophole through which I might creep forward to pursue my quest; and, worse than approaching failure, was the thought of Newton Forbes—his comments upon such an inglorious conclusion. Before that challenge I set myself to the task once more and considered desperately how it might be possible to resume; but inspiration had fainted at last, for I could see no further course of action. I thought upon Miriam

Daniel and her faithful Goldberg, and debated whether the news of her husband's death might win from her any more information than Sir Max Fordham had been able to offer on receipt of it. But it seemed unlikely. The dead man's activities were far more unfamiliar to his wife than to his victims, and I saw no particular promise from another meeting. It occurred to me that, since there must be others who knew of Daniel's death and were possibly familiar with his wife's circumstances, they might take occasion to let her hear the good news; but it seemed improbable and, of course, those who were responsible for his actual murder might know, no better than Sir Max, his real name. How to come at them I could no longer divine, or remotely imagine; and that evening, not sorry that Forbes made no appearance, I wasted time in wondering what the police would do when the matter came to their knowledge.

"This," I said to myself, as I smoked a final pipe, "is when the telephone ought to ring, or telegram arrive, or anonymous letter suddenly confront me. I've done all the work myself so far, without a pinch of help from any of the recognised gods out of the machine, and it is simply not playing the game for Providence to desert me now."

But then I remembered the anonymous letter from John Fleming to Mrs. Wilson at Ealing and rebuked myself. I had enjoyed this privilege already.

"There still remain the telephone and telegram," I said, "but since I have no telephone and it is too late for a wire——"

Anon I went to bed, heartily hoping that the police would fail.

"And if they do, Newton Forbes will throw all the blame upon my shoulders," I reflected, "and very likely Scotland Yard will revenge itself upon him, if not on me."

Yet, coming to a more sane and tranquil determination before sleep, I decided to go hat in hand to the inspector on the morrow and invite an opinion from him as to my next move.

"It will touch him," I thought, "and, before a display of humility, he may doff his austere attitude of distrust and offer a helping hand. He is not a very original or helpful spirit in adversity, but he is a policeman, and it would undoubtedly save him a great deal of anxiety if, even yet, I carried this thing through and saved him the necessity of confessing his sins to his superiors. And—and—any port in a storm."

I went to sleep, slumbered ill, and woke with a melancholy sense of something dark and painful hanging over me.

CHAPTER XI

THE DITTY BOX

HE who said that man was the only logical animal must have known exceedingly little about beasts. The truth would seem to be otherwise in my experience, for I have never made acquaintance with an unconscious creature, wild or tame, which did not run its life as far as possible on logical lines. The domestic animals are, of course, badly handicapped in this respect by their close companionship with ourselves. They are not free to do as they will and must endure much to make them pity our lack of logic. Man never yet ran his affairs by inductive observation, and I have personally known a metaphysician of considerable repute who was a child in the conduct of his own material existence.

Thus, when Forbes found me at the end of my resources and somewhat despondent on that account, instead of instantly undertaking all future operations on the case and summoning Scotland Yard to help him as he had constantly desired and threatened to do, he abandoned his old position, expressed utmost concern for my disappointment and urged me not to throw up the sponge, but carry on and give my astounding luck another chance!

I could hardly believe my ears, and at first sank to a mean thought that he only took this unexpected line because he dreaded making the needful confession to his masters; but, in reality, I knew better, for Newton was no man to shirk trouble and least likely of all to attempt evasion of difficulties caused by his own doubtful procedure. It was not because he shrank from the challenge that must face him when he acknowledged that he had left a criminal case in amateur hands, but solely and frankly because he felt sorry for me as I sat before him faced with downfall. To my success he had opposed a chilly indifference and utter lack of enthusiasm; in the hour of failure he shone forth as a friend and cudgelled his brains to know how I might proceed. But the afflatus was gone, my enthusiasm dead, my intuition perished. He tried to rouse a fighting spirit in me and failed.

"I'm sick of it," I told him. "I've done wonders and been exceedingly brilliant in my opinion, but now the game's up and I am beaten. I really cannot start all over again."

"You've only got a touch of cold feet," he said.

"I'll wager the thing will open out. There must be inferences—something vital sticking out somewhere that you have missed. Anyway, your experience is quite common to professional men. Detectives have as many disappointments as any other class of scientific workers. We naturally only hear of their triumphs—we law-abiding people—but in criminal circles their failures are quite familiar. The men who murdered Daniel are laughing in their sleeves no doubt. Probably they imagine we don't even know he's dead. I feel that this may be the psychological moment when their armour is off and when, granted the pointer, we should find them pretty easy."

"My own words to you on a previous occasion, dear chap. But—there it is : the pointer. Fordham is emphatically innocent. He was a victim of blackmail and paying plenty of money to shut the beggar's mouth. Three interviews he had and doubtless disgorged at each. But after that every line is blocked. One has to begin again at the point when Daniel returned to land and mounted Riverton quay with the money in his pocket."

"That raises a minor issue," said Forbes. "It's rather a question—perhaps no question at all—if this chap John Fleming ought not to shell out now we know to whom the money belongs."

But I was far beyond these trifles.

"No," I said. "We can clean up where necessary afterwards. I think Sir Max would far rather he left in peace than bothered with details of his last instalment. Money's nothing to him. For the moment the sole question is whether I can do another stroke. I don't think I can. There is a consciousness in me that I am a spent force. Since you are so sporting as to want me to carry on—and I may tell you I greatly appreciate this suggestion—then you must go one better and tell me how to do so. Don't think I haven't cudgelled my brains. Pride alone has prompted me to orgies of concentration on the infernal thing. It is not cold feet, but cold clues that deter me. You speak of inferences. There are no inferences that involve anybody we know and nothing sticking out either except the fact that I'm lost. But, coming to it from a fresh angle, if you can see any remaining course of action that would enable me to pick up the running, then nothing will be a trouble and I'll get on the scent again."

When it came to the point, however, Newton Forbes had little practical to advise. He smoked, scratched his black beard, frowned into the fire and made several efforts to start a speech, but dropped them on finding that any attempt to put his ideas into words only revealed their futility. He was not a detective and had none of the instincts of a detective. But his general mood persisted.

"When one comes to think of the case oneself, one sees what a remarkable job you made of it," he admitted. "Often we don't realise how damned smart our neighbours are till we try to do the things we have seen them do. You must fail yourself before you realise how much goes to success. And then, instead of belittling the successful, you give them their well-earned measure of praise, if you happen to be an honest man. Looking at this thing as though I were in it and considering the next step, I see what extraordinarily accurate steps you have already taken."

"Such praise from you," I answered, "goes far to soften the blow; but I'm beginning to fear it was never earned. I incline to the belief—painful though it is—that I have been the sport of some superior, bodiless intelligence—a spirit which has played with me, led me on, laughed at my elation, and fooled me to the top of my bent. Probably this mischievous Jack-o'-Lantern just rammed the right ideas into my head and took immense pleasure at seeing my vanity; and now, with the goal in sight, as I hoped, the wretch shuts off inspiration at the source and denies me that final necessary flash we need."

But Newton was not mentally endowed to appreciate this sort of humour.

"Give yourself one more chance," he advised. "You know very well that, for my own sake as well as yours, I should help if I could ; but I feel inspiration may not have run quite dry after all. You may round it off and get just the 'final flash' as you call it, if you hang on a bit longer. Darkest before dawn and all that. I'll look in again to-morrow night, and if you find you're fairly done in over it, then we can start upon the new aspect of the case and arrange a plan of campaign. A good deal may depend on how we approach the Yard and you've got to be the big noise of course. The more brilliant your performance appears, the more likely are they to admit I was justified in letting you have a free hand. They're going to be nasty in any case ; but my object is to calm them down from the start as far as possible."

"Henceforth I shall concentrate on you," I promised. "I shall tell them that you were perfectly justified from start to finish and that nothing has prevented you from putting a completed and triumphant piece of work into their hands. But such a lot of innocent and harmless people are involved that it's a thousand pities that we must. I hate going to them."

"Well, work double tides for twenty-four hours longer," he said. "After that your brains will need a rest, however it goes."

We talked on, but to no purpose; then Forbes left me, and five minutes later, as I was about to turn out my lamp and retire, there came a rap at my front door. I had no bell, but an attractive knocker which gave me pleasure. Guessing that the inspector was back again, and quick to cling to any straw of hope, I imagined that he might have returned with some helpful conceit bred of the clean and cold night air; but it was not Forbes. I went to the door myself, as my landlady had long since retired, and stared in amazement to see the squat and sturdy figure of Mr. Thorne.

"Good Lord, Samuel!" I cried. "What the mischief brings you here at this time of night? Not your hand, I hope? But if it's gone back on you, it's your own fault. Come in. What a time to call! You can't get back to Clyst to-night."

"That's all right, Doctor," he answered. "I'm on leave. They drove me away for a week. I hate holidays, but from time to time, in a manner of speaking, Sir Max, he just fires me and tells me to go away and play for a bit. And along of my hand, he's sent me off to rest."

Upon a chair in my hall the old man put down a square parcel wrapped in brown paper and then he followed me into my study.

"As for my hand," he said, "it's so right as ever it was and not a pang to it—all thanks to you. And being in Daleham for a week according to orders, though I daresay I'll defy the master and go back sooner, I minded you and thought I'd blow along some time, if you could spare a minute. I'm a very grateful fashion of man, and I'm very grateful to you, because by all accounts you saved me a hand I might have lost; and if I'd lost my hand, I'd so soon have lost my life."

He took off a heavy reefer jacket and a blue woollen wrap for his throat. Beneath was a lighter coat and under that a ship's jersey with 'Mignonette' across the breast of it.

"Where are you stopping?" I asked him. "You never said you knew Daleham."

"Weren't for me to bother you with what I knew, or didn't know, Doctor. But in truth I was a fisherboy to this place and worked in my uncle's trawler till I went to sea. That's more'n half a century ago. And I've got an old sister and her husband here yet. Widgery their name is."

"I know Mr. Widgery."

"Then you know a very God-fearing old man. I'm religious myself, in a manner of speaking, but he's the real goods. He preaches of a Sunday yet along with the Luke Gospellers, though up home eighty-four."

I poured drink for Samuel and produced tobacco. He was doubtful of my greeting at such a late hour, but grew very happy and contented to find it friendly.

"My first and foremost reason for calling," he said, "was to give you a gift, Doctor. I shan't be happy about it unless you accept of a gift, because Sir Max have told me you wouldn't take a penny for your service and all you done. But, though you can't take nought from them, I'll ax you to take something from me and I'll feel a good bit vexed if you refuse to do so."

"I've got a walking stick."

"That ain't enough. And turning it over in my mind, I come to the conclusion as I'd fetch along my ditty box and let you damn well choose whichever you willed among my treasures. A sailor's ditty box is where he stores away all manner of things—precious and useless both—yet all meaning something to the owner, so to speak. And I've got a brave ditty box with a powerful lot of queer and wonderful things collected all over the face of the globe more or less; and I'm going to ax you to take your pick out of the lot."

The old fellow's ingenuous and simple soul looked out of his eyes and I felt no little touched.

"Of course, Samuel, if you insist on it; but why should I rob you?"

"Far from it," he declared. "You aren't robbing me. I'm beginning to plan how to leave 'em and where to leave 'em. I can't take 'em with me and I'm getting an ancient chap and bound for a place where there ain't no ditty boxes, because there ain't no sea, and therefore there ain't no ships."

He rose, went into the hall and fetched his parcel. I had seen it already hanging over his bunk in the yacht, and now had leisure to admire the thing itself before he opened it. The ditty box was made of teak and rather finely carved. The lid opened upon hinges and revealed two drawers one above the other. They were each four inches deep and laden with an extraordinary collection of objects, some familiar, some wholly outlandish and unlike anything I had seen before.

"The work of Nature and the work of man, Doctor," explained the possessor, "and some are what you may call precious in themselves and others are valuable only to me by nature of facts I know about 'em."

"I well understand that. It is often the personal association that makes a thing worth far more than rubies," I told him.

He handed out all manner of queer objects and some he passed over without comment—a little native horn bottle, a pair of gypsy's gold ear-rings, an old ring with an amethyst in it, some loose cairngorm stones, other uncut, minor gems, and a small nugget of gold. Concerning the last he told a story of adventures in South Australia, and I found in many cases that his treasures had been gifts in return for acts of kindness to obscure and humble fellow spirits, who could not reward him with anything of value. But some of the things he explained that he had bought, when he was flush enough to do so, and his personal taste appeared to be such natural objects as odd shells, fossils, and pieces of pink and orange-coloured coral. Of the last he was very proud, for they were a new acquisition and had been purchased at Barbados.

"This drawer's all Nature you may say," he explained, "but the bottom layer is the works of man.

It contained two Spanish fans with scenes from the bull ring painted upon them, some silver spoons that came from Italy, a parrot's claw set in silver, a Chinese snuff-box and opium pipe and several netsuke of ancient date. He had six of these—very wonderfully carved, with the exquisite perfection of tiny detail peculiar to such works. They were wrought in ivory and yellow with age.

"The man that made them was fond of nature, Doctor, for all what he's done he made out of what he'd seen. They're a set of buttons from a mandarin's jacket, so I was told by the Chink who gave them to me. A funny story in a manner of speaking. I got the poor devil out of a mess in a pretty low joint at Shanghai. He was one of the firemen on my ship, and being young and quick in the uptake in them days, me and two other white men saved him by the skin of our teeth and fetched him aboard, and I healed his wounds after. No doubt we saved his life, because he'd just put out another chap, who had been cheating him at cards, and the friends of the other chap was going to slay him when we happened along and took charge. I got that for it; and I also got the buttons."

He pulled up his right sleeve and showed a scar that ran from his elbow to his wrist."

When you're young you heal quick—not like this baggering thumb that took you all your skill to get working again," he explained.

Then he tried to make me take the mandarin's buttons, and when I refused, begged me at least to accept one of them.

"This here little frog sitting on a lotus leaf is what you might call the top flower of the bunch," he said, "and I'd be a very pleased man if you'd take it off me."

"No, Samuel, I'm not going to do anything of the sort. It would spoil the set, and I believe you'd find, if you went to an expert in such things, that the set of six, just as they are, would be worth a lot of good money. They may belong to a great period and be the work of some well-known master. Treasures like these were easier to come by fifty years ago than now."

"I don't want money," he explained. "No sort of use for it in a general way, Doc. I ain't got a human belonging to me but my sister, and she's older than me, and if I had young relations, so to speak, they wouldn't come a hundred miles so near to my heart as what my gentleman and lady do. They are my life, you may say, and they know my worth, and they'll look very sharp after my well-being so long as I draw breath."

"You've earned their affection and respect," I told him. "They think a mighty lot of you—doubtless with very good reason."

"I suited the master," he admitted. "He saved my life in the War when I went overboard, and he was a good bit vexed at the time when I said I'd never leave him no more. But that was early days, before he knew the man I am. Before the peace came, he was very well pleased to take me aboard the yacht, for I'd got to know his ways by then; and when he married, the missis soon found I was worth a bit over my keep also."

"I bet she did, Samuel."

He urged me again to take all the buttons; but I only promised to get them valued and let him hear their real worth.

"Then, if I can run to it, we'll do a deal," I said, and with that he was reluctantly content.

We drank together and then, just before he packed his box again, to my astonishment he suddenly alluded to Lionel Daniel.

Moribund hope revived for a fluttered moment, yet even as he spoke I guessed the old man could not possibly know as much as myself. Yet he was evidently aware of the mystery and declared that he could add a little to my knowledge if I so desired.

"D'you mind when you was last on the yacht, Doctor, and told Sir Max you wanted news of that chap by name of Forest?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, Samuel—just before you served drinks, and I told you to watch out after your hand."

"That's right. And you found Sir Max in a pretty sour temper."

"Well, I bothered him. Naturally he didn't see why I should be interested."

"But you was?"

"Very much so—for rather important reasons. Sir Max told me a good deal more next time we met at Clyst."

"And you told him the best piece of news he'd struck for a month of Sundays—that the man was dead. That interested me a lot, too, Doctor, and I'm making bold to wonder how you knew it. I don't ax after no impertinence, and you may say it ain't no particular business of mine anyway. More it is, speaking exact, but everything that is my master's business is business of mine so to say, and his good is my good and his evil is my evil. So, knowing Sir Max had a pretty fair down on that chap, I was well pleased to hear you report he's a deader; but I feel a good bit surprised to know how you found it out."

Hope faded, for after all Thorne only wanted information, but had none to impart. However, he proceeded without waiting for me to speak, and indicated that he might furnish a detail or two worthy of my ear.

"He was a very bad sort of man—I got that much from Sir Max—and seeing you felt anxious to hear a bit more about him, Doctor, I can tell you a trifle that might perhaps throw a ray of light. You wouldn't mention it again, however, would you?"

"No, Samuel, it's safe enough with me. I'm keen to follow the beggar up for private reasons. He is certainly dead, and I may tell you that I was the first to discover the fact. But a good deal of mystery attached to his death, and if you know anything, however apparently unimportant, that could help me to fill the gap in his movements after he left the 'Mignonette' that night and before I learned who he really was—long after he had died —I should thank you very much."

"Exactly so," he answered, "and then, maybe, you'll tell me a bit. Just a spot more of that wonderful whiskey, Doctor. It ain't a long yarn, but I'll wet my whistle afore I go to it."

He drank, appeared to reflect a moment, and then, as a preliminary to his remarks, he opened the ditty box again, rummaged in it, and fetched out a small curiosity I had already seen.

"You'd never think, clever though you are, as such an object could come in the tale of what I know about this 'Forest', so called. But it do. However, I'll begin from the start, and the start you may say is Sir Max. Likewise the finish also."

He emptied his glass, remained silent to collect his thoughts and order his narrative, then braced himself and began.

"I wouldn't tell this yarn to nobody but you, Doctor, for I ain't sure as I've ever struck another man I'd trust with it. Not of late years anyway. But I trust you and I've got your word that it don't go no further. And, being in a manner of speaking, another man's secret rather than my own, of course I feel delicate upon the subject. It is Sir Max's secret, not mine, and it arises out of a very difficult position what he got himself into a good bit ago. My own part ain't nothing of any consequence—being merely to lend a hand to help my gentleman, as a good servant of the old school, like me, naturally would do.

"Well, Sir Max has got a very fine wife as you know; but he's one of they men who have a cruel weakness for a fancy lady behind the scenes. A very dangerous contrivance, and asking for trouble, and God knows you'd never think any sane man ever wanted but one woman, if that. I never wanted none at all. It's all over now I can assure you, because this here Forest properly put the fear of God into Sir Max, though he was a servant of the devil himself—Forest was. The young woman lived outside London, and my master done her exceeding well and took a good bit of pleasure in her—there's no denying it. He's young for his age and a bit of a boy still, and he found, no doubt, that it did him a power of good to escape his lawful lady's high-minded ways and noble principles and so on, now and again. God forgive him for it, I say. And no doubt He will do so, for a man that does more good in the world with his pile than Sir Max, and all under the rose, never breathed.

"Well, two years ago, when Lady Max, as I call her, was visiting friends in Scotland, like a fool my master took his little friend to a night club. He'd done it before in safety and thought he could again. But that was where the poor gentleman came to such shocking grief. Forest was there, and being that sort of varmint and knowing a lot about his betters, because he lived by 'em, he smelt out Sir Max's affair. It was damn bad luck, because Sir Max had finished with the girl at that very moment and meant to go straight in future, as became a man forty years of age and with such a wonder of a wife; but he was just too late, you understand, and the blackmailer got his claws in him and kept 'em in.

"You may have remarked, Doctor, that Lady Fordham is just the last party on earth to go light on a mistake of that sort. Many high ladies might do so, and many everyday women, having their own axe to grind in a manner of speaking, wouldn't have got up in the air about it. But not so Sir Max's lady. He well knew, and this dead skunk well knew, that if the truth got to Lady Fordham there would be an unholy smash. She wouldn't have stood for it an hour, but fired Sir Max instanter; or if she couldn't divorce him under the law, at least she'd have separated from him for ever. And, mind you, in some cases that might not have hurt a man too much, being a common event in high society that don't keep gentlemen out of their own class, or their own clubs and so on. But Sir Max, he properly adored his wife. He went so far as to honour me by explaining his fine feelings for her and his high opinion of the lady, and his great admiration for her fine line of conduct about everything, not to mention her worship of the sea and her fine seamanship and her magnificent success as a yachting partner. It weren't her money, because, though you can't have too much and it came in very handy, Sir Max was blessed with tons of his own. It was just his devotion, you understand, and his feeling that it would be a wicked shame to bring scandal and sorrow on such a rare sort of a female as his wife. All of which things Forest found out, that being his filthy trade.

"It was after his second visit that Sir Max confided in me. He was a confiding sort of man really, and he knew, after ten years of me, what I thought of him and how far he could trust me. By then, of course, he was running straight as the crow flies; but there it was, and Forest could prove the facts, for he'd nosed out every particular—dates included. And I didn't know what to do about it naturally, such a beastly man being outside my experience of course. He'd knocked a thousand pounds out of Sir Max at his first visit and he'd knocked the same amount out of him the second time. He always warned when he was coming, and as the quality's movements is public property, he always came when Lady Fordham was away. First time he came to Clyst; second time he came when we were in harbour at Dover; and after that there was a long gap and Sir Max began to reckon he'd heard the last of him. But a letter awaited for him when we got our mail on reaching Riverton from the Mediterranean and he came down, the day after, for another haul. Of course the stuff had to be negotiable and in ready money and Sir Max just got it in time.

"Well, I begged the man not to suffer no more of this wicked robbery. I said, 'Face the music and have it out and send the rogue to prison'. But too much was at stake and Sir Max hoped that if Forest would compound and take a lump sum, he might finish with him. However, that sort don't kill the goose that lays the golden eggs if they can help it. He knew he was safe and he said a thou. would do to go on with; but Sir Max had only got him five hundred that time, and he told Forest he couldn't have no more because he was pressed for the minute. I was in the saloon, hid unbeknownst behind a service screen, and heard the talk. Sir Max finally promised him a dollop more inside a month, and then he rang and told me to see the varmint was put ashore.

"Forest carried it with a high hand and Sir Max kept his temper, and I fetched drinks, according to the custom when anybody was going off. And, while I was away doing so, my wits moved, and I said to myself, 'Call yourself a good and faithful servant? Here's work crying out to be done and you stand by and don't lift a finger to it, well knowing there ain't another soul on earth as could carry it off certain and sure same as you might! Work, as you're paid to do by a good master'. I said that to myself, you understand, and properly lashed myself for being just a common paid slave instead of the master's right hand and the apple of his eye, same as he thought me. And then I fixed upon a very fine determination, Doctor, and acted according."

He broke off and turned to the object from the ditty box. It was the queer, little bottle made from some small deer's horn.

"You'll bear with me stopping the tale just here, because this curiosity comes in next and I ain't really going out of my course, but taking all in order. I could tell you a very fine yarn about it. It was give me by a savage on the Congo, because I defended the creature on an expedition. A medicine man he was and a very well-meaning chap, but pretty well up against it with his chief when we came along. They was going to kill him because they'd lost a battle with the next-door heathen; but I bought his life with a string of beads. They may have killed him just the same after we moved on. I couldn't say as to that. A medicine man's life ain't all jam. But he gave me this—nothing to make a song about in itself, you'll say. Only it holds the deadliest poison ever the cunning of a savage squeezed out of tropical roots, or berries. He told me that three drops would put an elephant out in five minutes and, though he granted as I'd be little like to want to poison an elephant, there was others I might run up against who would be the better for one drop. He said they'd go to sleep ten minutes after and never wake no more. Well, I took it, for it was the best the poor devil could do, and it went in the ditty box of course; and they say you always find a use for everything if you keep it long enough, don't they, Doctor? As for the rest of the affair, you're a quick-minded man and will take my meaning no doubt."

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I stared at him and for a moment he abandoned his tale.

"It's like this," he said. "You always want to shine afore them who shine afore you, and you shone mighty bright afore me when you mended my fool hand. So I'm well pleased to show you the steadfast-fashion man I am, though old and ignorant; and I'm the better pleased to tell you about it, because there ain't nobody else I could trust with the particulars. I noticed you was a bit puzzled when you had your last drink along with Sir Max on the yacht, and I marked he was a bit puzzled with you. He said, when you was gone, that you were one of the best chaps he'd struck; but he was blessed if he knew why a man like you should be interested in that brute. And I'd dearly like to know, for my part, how you got on to it he was dead."

"You knew he was?"

"Why—who should know if not me, Doctor? But I ain't finished the yarn yet. Where was I? I know. I nipped down to my cabin after I'd told 'em to lower the dinghy; and then I took in the drinks, and I dropped two drops out of this here little horn thimble in Master Forest's glass. I hoped it wouldn't fell him instanter and make trouble, but I hustled him off the ship so quick as lightning the moment he'd let it down and, of course, 'twas I rowed the dinghy, not nobody else. It was all forgot the minute after, and since the police never went into no details and the chap—name of Wills—I said rowed Forest ashore left us in Barbados invalided off, that matter went through. Not Sir Max himself knows I rowed the dinghy that night, and he never will know it.

"But I rowed good and hard and I wasn't a fathom from the yacht before the man gave one yawn and went out. A very fine, painless poison seemingly; but I'd run it awful close. However, the Lord helps them that help themselves, as we all know, and it was meant from the beginning of time that I should carry out that little job neat and workmanlike. It chanced to be a fine still night with a gentle roll after a blow and no moon—just convenient and suitable. I knew the coastline of the Bay from boyhood and I rowed out two mile, ran in presently Daleham way, where a couple of rock-ledges throw out side by side from shore and made shift to get the dead man overboard. I dropped him in the water first, then changed my mind and dragged him up under the mouth of a little cave, where soon or late I counted that some longshoreman would stumble across him. I was back aboard an hour afore Lady Fordham came off in the pinnace. And the thing that's beggared my wits ever since that night was why the mischief it never came to hand that the scorpion had been found where I left him."

"Why did you leave the money on him?" I asked. "If he had been found by the police, they'd have traced it."

His face fell.

"Lordy! Fancy that! I calculated that the body would turn up and get in the newspapers; and then Sir Max would read the glad tidings and know by the money it was his foe. Now I see I didn't ought to have done that. That's where I struck a snag seemingly; and since you know all about it, you'll be doing the fair thing to tell me how you knew. That is if I ain't keeping you from your rest."

I stared at the old man, and some deep-rooted operation of mother-taught conscience dictated my next words. They were not at all what he expected and astonished him no little.

"But, Samuel, hang it you know, this is murder!"

It was his turn to manifest wonder.

"'Murder', Doc? That's a ugly word to say to me. You don't talk of murder when you trap a rat, or crack a louse!"

A side-issue arrested me.

"When I was having my drink aboard with Sir Max, you prepared that too—eh?"

He grinned, and his old, yellow teeth shone in the firelight, for my lamp had begun to go out. He grinned, then laughed aloud and made this remarkable reply:

"Oh no, Doctor. I know my place, and I know men. I knew you wasn't any enemy to Sir Max. But a blackmailer! Who'd hesitate to put that filthy creature away if the chance offered? Vermin's vermin."

"A fellow creature, Thorne?"

He seemed doubtful as to the truth of this assertion.

"You might perchance allow, in a manner of speaking, that such mess was human, and the thought of such a thing is enough to put you a good bit out of conceit of your kind, Doctor. I'd try never to think a blackmailer was a fellow-man if I was you, because it will turn you against your own breed, and that's no sense. You may not feel so deep about this wretch as what I did, for why? Because you've never seen one of 'em at work on your best friend. But if you had, then you wouldn't talk about murder to a decent, God-fearing party like me. That hurts."

"Sorry," I said.

"Oh, you didn't mean it—I'm sure of that. And, by the same token, there's far worse deeds than a straight honest-to-goodness murder."

"My own opinion and I can't deny it," I admitted.

"Nobody can't. I've met murderers to the full as trustworthy as myself; and if I thought as you wouldn't shake the hand, or give the glad-eye to the man who wiped out that canker, I'd be a lot disappointed in you, Doctor."

He laughed it off and forgave me. Then he picked up the bottle and handed it to me.

"Now there's a keepsake which I do beg of you to stick to for friendship and esteem," he said. "I ain't likely to want it again; because, if there's one thing you may say we can gather for sure and certain, it is that Sir Max ain't going to run his head in a noose no more. That's all over, so you keep it. In fact, I won't take no denial, Doctor. You never know: you might want it yourself some fine day!"

I asked him various questions and he answered them with interest and in detail. He gave me the impression of a man who had done what he considered an extraordinarily clever thing and delighted to find a trusted friend to whom he could impart the fine shades of his achievement.

"Where was Sir Max to send the balance of that instalment? Do you remember, Samuel?"

"He offered to send it, but the man said he'd call for it—later on at his own time. It was when he said that I got my happy thought and ran to my ditty box, Doctor. 'No, my lad, you won't call on Sir Max, nor nobody else but the devil after to-night—not if I know anything', I said to myself."

Thorne chuckled at the fire and then turned to me.

"And now, Doctor, you've heard my end, and I'd take it as very sporting if you'd give me a bit of yours."

"Well, Samuel," I replied, "we appear to be making a night of it and I'll mend the fire, get another lamp and pour you another tot. I may tell you that your moral values have rather tended to disorganise my own; but I try to keep an open mind as I wander through this vale of tears and, taking one relation of this entertainment with another—linking up what I know of the late blackmailer with what you have told me, my instinct is to keep my nerve about it."

"There's times when the least said is the soonest mended, Doctor, and this looks to me one of 'em. But granted that, I'm naturally a bit interested to know why nothing was heard of the creature after he'd pegged out."

"You shall know," I said. "You shall hear everything, Samuel—on the same understanding that you told me your tale."

"Mum's the word, Doctor."

And then I narrated the whole story, and he listened with profound attention and increasing pleasure as I drew to an end. We were sitting together and he slapped my knee with his sound paw, when I had done, and announced his complete satisfaction.

"Dammy, Doctor! There ain't another two men in England who could have carried out such a job of work better than you and me," he said. "If that ain't the craft of an all-seeing Providence, then you'll never find no such thing."

I was getting exceedingly sleepy and the clock struck two as I came to an end.

"So that's that, Samuel," I concluded, "and for the moment only one idea occurs to me. I propose to wind up this affair as it concerns two other people: Daniel's wife and the man who had Sir Max's money. That can be done quite easily without creating any more attention; and, as regards your master himself, my advice would be never to allude to the subject again."

"My sentiments to a hair, Doctor. There's no better deeds we do for other folk than them they never know about, because then they ain't got the tiresome worry of showing gratitude and feeling under obligations. I've had the great satisfaction of telling you the tale, always knowing somehow you was just the man to see its fine points, and, be it as it will, Sir Max don't need to know no details. He won't be stung no more by this dead hornet, and that's all that matters to him. Let the young man keep the money. That's no odds to us. You can tell him that he's welcome to it and can regard it as honestly earned so long as he keeps his mouth shut as to how he come by it. And the poor woman, if she wants another husband after her dose—well, there's nought to stop her taking him now."

"Come and see me again next time you're in Daleham, Samuel," I said; "but not this time. I've got my old friend, Mr. Newton Forbes, Inspector of Police, to consider and he's an inquiring lad and, as I have told you, he knows a good bit about what I've been doing."

"A nod's as good as a wink to a blind 'oss, Doctor. We sail again pretty soon for the South and when I'm back, maybe I'll blow in one day. And bless you meantime. I'd much like to think we may meet again, and have a bit of a tell together."

"Do so, and I'll find out about the mandarin's buttons, Samuel."

I shook the assassin's hand, heard him stump off whistling through the darkness of the winter night with his ditty box under his arm, and retired to bed.

"Only one problem left," I said to myself: "Dear old Forbes."

CHAPTER XII

"WE ARE NOT AMUSED"

FOR various reasons, and first to avoid Forbes until his evening visit, I left Daleham at an early hour next morning and spent the day with my own thoughts in Redchester. My line of approach to Newton Forbes demanded very careful consideration, since it was vital to suspend his approaching operations for the welfare of all concerned; but how to do so without breaking my promise to Samuel Thorne presented difficulties of considerable magnitude. I came to the conclusion that much depended on Forbes himself, and I hoped that I might manœuvre him into a position where the man would triumph over the policeman. He had, of course, no little to gain by leaving the business alone and trusting my word that the greatest good to the greatest number, including himself, depended upon doing so; but his own fate and any possible evil that might fall upon him for neglect of duty would certainly not influence his actions for a moment. To him a murderer was a murderer, and did I make any further appeal for silence on the ground of his own peril, the answer was obvious. He would reply that if I had actually discovered the murderer, his own possible perils were evaded and his course of action, in leaving the case to me, amply justified.

Therefore, after I had returned home, and Forbes presently dropped in to tell me my liberty of action was ended and to detail his immediate future movements, I felt strung to a last triumph of diplomacy and summoned my wearied wits to accomplish it. I had designed the line of attack, but well knew, when the crux was reached, that considerable unpleasantness might be expected. 'I will take a light hand and strive, if possible, to keep the argument free from acrimony', I told myself; 'but I almost wish the incomparable Thorne were going to relate his story again in his own way, for it might easily carry far more weight with Newton than any pressure in my power."

The inspector came to the point at once. He was in uniform on this occasion, and all the more alarming for that reason to my agitated mind. He poured himself his usual trifling refreshment and began to talk with utmost resolution.

"I've settled what to do, Meredith, and I think you cannot fail to feel it is the only right and proper course—rather crafty too. In these cases you can't do better than go to the top, where most often you find sympathy and understanding as well as brain power. I've sketched out a full account of the case up to date, which I want you to read carefully. And then I shall send it to the Commissioner of Police himself and nobody else. He may not read it; but I venture to hope you'll enclose a brief letter with my statement begging him to make a personal matter of it."

"Splendid!" I answered. "Just a forthright line you would take, old man. Of course I'll read it and of course I'll impress upon the Commissioner the vital importance of looking into it himself. I happen to know a great friend of his—a very great friend—who might put in a word. We'll come to that presently. I have first some rather interesting sidelights for your consideration and I must throw them in my own way."

"The time is passed for sidelights," he said; but I ignored the remark.

"I have been thinking rather deeply on the abstract subject of murder itself," I began, "and I am inclined to believe that my ideas are not original, but owe their inspiration to your own ideas. A pregnant thought from a friend, or some potent line in a book, or newspaper leader, will often stick in our memory; and presently we find ourselves uttering it as an original contribution during some future talk. There are, you may say, all sorts of murderers—good, bad and indifferent. Murder has been a heroic as well as a despicable deed—sanctified by the spirit of its commission on great occasions and loathed for its unspeakable villainy on others. Murderers differ as widely as any other craftsmen and you cannot lump them—even the confessed villains—together. History, for example, reeks with the fanatical murderer who destroys for the honour of his Joss and agreeably combines his secret blood-lust with the glory of God; and there is also the faithful, dog-like murderer without a thought or impulse but to protect the object of his love and devotion. In fact to honest students like ourselves motive should make all the difference; instead of which we are prone to let a minor consideration—the means rather than the motive—guide judgment. Poison, for example, we agree is the unforgivable medium; and yet cooler consideration and study of history might admit excellent poisoners."

"What's all this rigmarole about?" asked Forbes. "I'm not here to-night for a lecture on murder. I want you to read this."

"Listen a little longer and don't frown," I begged. "I generalise in this fashion for a purpose, and you need not bother about these voluminous notes for the moment, because it is quite in the stars that, after you have heard me, you will lose interest in them."

"What d'you mean?" he asked. "You're not going to spring anything else since last night?"

"That depends largely on you," I answered. "But, assuming you take the rational line, throw up the sponge and freely grant that this is a case unique and extraordinary in which a rank outsider has actually accomplished, or achieved, all that he undertook—unless you cede me the palm and admit my emphatic if undeserved victory—then there is nothing doing."

"Why couldn't you tell me yesterday?"

"For the best possible reason: I did not myself know when we parted. Be calm. I don't want to put any strain upon you, Newton; I only beg you to keep your nerve as you are used to do. Let us see where we stood, and if I say a word with which you are not in agreement, please stop me. It is admitted by us, I think, that Sir Max Fordham was in the hands of a blackmailer, that his blackmailer came to a bad end, but that he has nothing whatever to do with the destruction of Lionel

Daniel. That, at any rate, is the absolute and certain fact of which I hold proofs. Fordham is as innocent of this business as you are. I can, as I say, give you the proof of that if you harbour any remaining doubt."

Newton considered.

"For the argument—if you have got one—let that be granted," he answered. "We can return to the point if necessary."

"That also depends upon you," I replied. "And that being so, let us consider a moment Daniel's crime which preceded the crime from which he in his turn suffered. He was a blackmailer—one of the vile offences against society which, in my opinion, invariably merits capital punishment, whereas murder does not always do so. What did Mr. Justice Rowlatt say in a recent case? He declared that to blackmail was one of the most terrible crimes that could be committed, and he added that it could not be too well known that though a man might be the blackest criminal, to threaten him with exposure was an abomination. 'Every man in this country, be he prince or labourer', he added, 'must know what a devilish thing it is to threaten a man with an accusation of crime in order to extort money from him'."

"Well," answered Forbes, "you can get penal servitude for life for doing so. What more do you want?"

"I want to argue that the destruction of such a pest must not be regarded as among the more despicable assassinations of which I spoke. I want you to see this vital point and take a large view, admittedly difficult in your profession, but vital at the present moment. Because what I shall say next depends entirely upon your attitude."

"You have done some more in the case?" he asked.

"Some more has been done for me in the case," I explained. "I now know that a bare-faced blackguard has been put out of the way, and so thoroughly do I find myself in sympathy with the action, after learning its far-reaching significance, that I may be described as on the side of the slayers. How many unfortunate persons there are in the world who would applaud this business we cannot tell; but it is safe to bet that Sir Max was not this man's solitary victim. I know at any rate enough to feel that a dangerous and anti-social scoundrel has been destroyed for the good of the community, and I experience nothing but such emotion towards those who did it, as long ago you yourself felt when you heard that a Rasputin had been knocked on the head."

Conflicting emotions chased each other over the swart countenance of the inspector, but as yet anger was not one of them.

"In other words, stripped of all this talk, you have found out who murdered Lionel Daniel?" he asked.

"Not in other words—just in those words, not to be separated or reduced to any bare bones by you."

"As a policeman I am only concerned with the bare bones, and it is up to you, Doctor, to tell me all you know of the bare bones and leave it at that."

I sighed.

"This is more than disappointing, Newton. Surely you are a man, not a machine? Would you deliberately let responsible, respectable, adequate, useful members of society submit to the processes of the law and suffer penalties, perhaps death, for an act of public-spirited and loyal humanity? I can't believe it."

His face flushed and I perceived that he was going to get annoyed.

"On purpose I have approached you with utmost gravity," I hastened to assure him, "because I knew you would be sure to take a grave opinion. I might have struck a lighter note and passed off this incident upon you much as it was passed off upon me; but alas! I felt it vain. By your looks I know you would never have appreciated the human, even humorous side—not though you heard it from my lips. Yet there is always a humorous side to everything wherein human nature is concerned. I might have dwelt on that; and yet I know, like her gracious Majesty, Queen Victoria, on an unfortunate occasion, you would only have retorted 'We are not amused'."

"Stop fooling, Meredith," he ordered sternly. "This is not a fooling matter and nobody knows that better than you. Either you know who killed Daniel, or you do not. I ask you to tell me which it is."

"I know."

"Then, if you conceal the information, you are an accessory after the fact."

"I know that too. It would, you observe, have been perfectly easy to keep the rest of the case to myself and let you go on with it to ultimate futility; but such is my confidence in your wisdom and my desire you should escape the embarrassment of sending this screed to Scotland Yard, that I have so far strained a situation created since I saw you last, by telling you that all is well and that you are happily free to abandon your intention. If, after my assurance that justice has been done and that those who did it are not going to suffer any punishment for doing it—if, after hearing that, Newton, you honestly think morality and common sense demand you to continue, then you will, of course, do so; but this I can assure you—not the might of Scotland Yard will ever find those responsible. You can lock me up and, for all I know, I shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment; but I certainly cannot be made to tell anybody who killed Lionel Daniel; and, for the reason that those directly responsible belong, in my opinion, to the salt of the earth and are worthy of nothing but commendation, their secret is safe with me."

"I don't believe a word of this: you're bluffing," he said; but I only shook my head.

"Did you ever know me to bluff? No, Forbes; from no desire to shine I tell you the absolute truth. It fell into my lap—just pure good fortune. It rounds off the case beautifully and shows how, for some capricious reason, fate has chosen to be with me to the end. Beginner's luck as you rightly call it. And I wish I could make you see what a delightful yarn it is—viewed both artistically and morally. Can't you let the details go and just dwell on the novelty of the ensemble? No automatics, no active rascals, no horrors, no detectives, no adventures, no self-slaughter, none of the horrible business of hunting naughty people to the gallows. All seemly and pleasant and peaceful—just one bad lad painlessly removed to make the world cleaner, and everybody happy ever afterwards—except you."

He scowled at me.

"Like Alice in Wonderland," he said.

"Exactly! Admirable simile!"

He was quite silent for some time and I waited for him to speak. Much unquiet and even distress fretted his brow and he regarded me with deep disquiet if not actual disgust. Then he rose suddenly, left his untasted refreshment, gathered up his papers and departed without bidding me 'good night.' It was much what I expected, and my only sorrow centred on the grave threat to a valued friendship. That he would do nothing definite until we met again my knowledge of him assured me, and the sole doubt in my mind was whether he would finally proceed with headquarters and throw the onus on me, or return with some other proposition. That he would impart his decision before acting upon it, I felt confident.

For a week, which was longer than I had expected, he left me alone and merely nodded when we met out-of-doors. Then he came in as usual one evening and submitted a means by which in his opinion we might preserve our ancient goodwill. Meantime, however, I had written two letters and wound up every outlying thread of the business. I informed Mrs. Daniel that her erring spouse was definitely dead and buried, and assured her that she might proceed on that certainty in so far as Mr. Goldberg was concerned, even though the law refused her to presume his death in connection with his estate. I begged her for her own happiness to trust me and believe me; and she wrote by return to say that she and her friend were exceedingly glad to do so. To the musician who called himself Sebastian Denvers, I wrote informing him that the mystery of the dead man was satisfactorily cleared up and that, in consideration of his ceasing to feel any further interest in it, or demanding details, which could in no case be forthcoming, he might regard the money, not as a loan, but as a gift. He replied immediately to record his satisfaction at such an arrangement, and added that in any case he had always regarded the money as an act of Providence, to be returned to the community, or not, as he might determine.

Then came Forbes. He was gloomier than usual, for he had detected the germs of another European war and saw no way out of it. I strove to rally him with a light touch.

"We can only hope we shall not win it," I said, "for another victory, under the present low water mark British statesmanship, will mean national extermination. However, we need not dread another victory. The industrious bugs of Socialism are sucking the nation's life-blood pretty steadily now. It will be bled white in a few years, with no reserves of strength to oppose anybody."

He was in no mood for jesting, however, and quickly came to the vital matter.

"I'll do this," he began. "I'll hear every particular of the truth, with not a point held back on your honour, and then I'll judge whether to proceed as I had intended to do, or let the matter go as you wish."

"Nothing would have suited me better," I answered, "and I should have welcomed such a course gladly, well knowing that my story would have brought you down on the right side. But unfortunately that is impossible. When I first heard this remarkable tale, no idea or hint was given me that it struck to the very roots of Daniel's death. So certain were the tellers that there could only be one opinion upon their line of action, that they introduced the thing as a matter of no account, merely bargaining that I would not let what I was to learn go further. Judging the information had to do with some utterly minor and probably unimportant point, I gave that promise. Strictly, therefore, neither you, nor any man, has a right to the information; but seeing how you yourself are involved, and that it was only thanks to your sagacity I was permitted to apply my secret methods to the case, I do feel that you are an exception. I want to tell you the whole story and I believe myself justified in doing so, but, of course, only on the condition imposed upon myself: that it shall never leave your lips again. Your morbid sense of right may accuse me of further iniquity and decline the terms; but you will really do well to hear everything, and I press you to do so for the reason that complete knowledge will calm your shattered moral sensibilities and put you right with me—a consummation I much desire."

He did not reply to the point, but vented some further irritation.

"And I hope to God henceforth you'll mind your own business and stop in your shell, for I have no wish to be faced with another of these abominable problems. A man has his self-respect, if nothing else."

His heat pleased me.

"Fear nothing on that score," I promised.

"You will not again find me down among the dead men before my lawful turn to join their company. I do not tempt Fate once more, even though you may press me to try."

He sulked a little longer and then succumbed, gave the needful undertaking and heard all there was to tell.

" 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'," I concluded. "The essence of virtue depends not upon the seen, but the unseen; not in the act, but the spirit of the doer and purpose of the deed. And now, old man, tell me, where do you mark the helmet of Mars again glimmering over the horizons of unhappy Europe?"

THE END

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Mrs. Pepys, needless to say, figures prominently in these pages, in which we are also introduced to Mr. Blick (the Vicar); Widow Fripp, who sets her cap (or rather "flaunts her churchy garters") at him; the churchwarden with his "potato-nosed lady" ("though otherwise a good-natured woman"); Admiral Norker, who does crosswords in "sermon time," and many other quite delightful people.

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